ECSU LIBRARY
PR6025.I624 D37
Millin, Sarah Gertrude Liebson,
The dark river.
CTWW
3 4041 05087 8309

THE DARK RIVER

by

SARAH GERTRUDE MILLIN

PR 6025 .I624 D37

Millin, Sarah Gertrude
Liebson, 1889-1968.

The dark river

58674

EASTERN CONNECTICUT
STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY
WILLIMANTIC, CONN.

THE DARK RIVER

IMPORTANT NOVELS

WOMAN
By Magdeleine Marx

MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP
By Marguerite Audoux

MASTER EUSTACE
By Henry James

INVISIBLE TIDES
By Beatrice Kean Seymour

SARAH AND HER DAUGHTER
By Bertha Pearl

THE THUNDERBOLT
By G. Colmore

MARGOT'S PROGRESS
By Douglas Goldring

THE FORTUNE
By Douglas Goldring

THE BURNING SECRET
By Stefan Zweig

THE DARK RIVER

By

SARAH GERTRUDE MILLIN

EASTERN CONNECTICUT
STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY
WILLIMANTIC, CONN.
WITHDRAWN

NEW YORK
THOMAS SELTZER
1920

PUBLIC LIBRARY,
BRISTOL, CONN.

PR
6027
.I624
D37

Copyright, 1920, by
THOMAS SELTZER, Inc.

All rights reserved

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO MY
MOTHER AND FATHER

58674

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/darkriver0000sara

CHAPTER I

§ 1

THERE were times when, just as the sun appeared over the hill on the opposite bank of the river, John Oliver would rise hastily from bed and make his way to the bar of the Lost Hope Diggings, and sit on the wooden bench outside until the bar opened. Then he would enter and remain until closing time. At closing time he would, except for certain involuntary spasms, walk very stiffly home, his shirt bulging where a bottle lay against his breast, his earth-stained duck trousers hanging precariously from his hips.

Meanwhile John Oliver's Kaffirs would swelter undisturbed in dagga-begotten dreams in his claim beside the Vaal River. But whether the work was done, whether a diamond was found, whether John Oliver eventually got it or not, was hardly a vital matter in John Oliver's scheme of existence.

When he had no money, he managed without. When he had money, he managed so that he hadn't.

In a way, John Oliver was a family man.

§ 2

John Oliver came to South Africa with the last batch of volunteers to fight the Boers. But peace was declared before ever he saw the veld.

Being one of a respectable English family, he had left neither a past nor a future behind him. He was healthy and good-looking, with a fresh dark skin, black hair, greyish-blue eyes, and rather high cheek-bones. Most of his other assets were in the nature of the marshal's baton which Napoleon's soldiers carried in their knapsacks. Potentially he bore in his inside coat-pocket a South African millionaire's cheque-book. As a basis he had a fair education, a few pounds, and a vague, but hitherto unjustified, belief in his own capabilities. He was of those who cannot see difficulties until they are upon them, and who then find them insurmountable. He had courage rather than resistance, moods rather than powers. At school he was among those boys who intended to do well, but did not succeed above mediocrity because they shirked the distasteful subjects. But he was good and popular at games.

He volunteered for the South African war because two of his friends had also volunteered, and remained because he supposed that an Englishman could always teach a Colonial a thing or two, and because there was nothing waiting for him at home. But by the time he had drifted down to the River Diggings he had not added much to any South African's store of knowledge.

He arrived at the Lost Hope Diggings in 1902, in the afternoon of a day in January. A post-cart drawn by four horses brought him, his trunk, portmanteau, and bundle of rugs, to the edge of a tree-fringed brown stream which took its name

from its colour—the Vaal River it was called—the dun-coloured river. There were a few natives sitting under the trees. A tall yellow boatman, who was not more than half Kaffir, came across the river to fetch him, rowing a heavy boat that had a little water in the bottom. Another native sat in the stern of the boat. When the boatman came nearer John Oliver saw that he wore a black patch over one eye, and had a fallen-in nose. He was very thin and wrinkled, but had powerful arms. It was summer-time, and the river ran heavy and dark and swift, and John Oliver told himself that the oarsman looked like the Boatman on the Styx, coming to take him across to doom. The apt comparison pleased him while it depressed him.

The man spoke a few words to him in a snuffling voice, seized his bundles and indicated a seat. Two Kaffir women, each with a baby in a shawl on her back, who had been sitting on the ground waiting for the boat, entered also.

The heavy boat being now to some extent laden, the man in the stern took an oar and one of the rowlocks from the boatman and assisted him to row against the current. They rowed the boat powerfully up-stream till about the middle of the river, when with a little less effort, but keeping the boat's nose always up-stream, they allowed the current to help them carry the boat to the landing-place.

Arrived there, the boatman jumped out and wound the boat's chain round a big black stone.

The native women with the children got up, and John Oliver, stiff from a long journey in the post-cart, followed them.

On this side the river was flanked by black shiny stones. There was not a tree anywhere, all had been cut down. These were public diggings, and men came to disembowel the earth not to embellish her.

The day was unbearably sultry. The black, hot, shiny stones burnt John Oliver's feet through the soles of his boots. His clothes clung to his body. The touch of one finger against another was uncomfortable.

The only building before his eyes was of the universal corrugated iron, which the South African calls zinc, a stone's throw from the river. It consisted of a store and a canteen, euphemistically styled an hotel, under one roof. A verandah ran the entire length of the long front, and under it were narrow wooden benches and a big scale. Native women and children sat on the benches and on the scale. They wore tattered print dresses and their heads were covered.

Here and there he saw tents and mud-houses. Further up the hill the natives lived in locations. As far as his eye could reach were nothing but stones and earth in mounds, on which grew a few greyish-green shrubs and tall weeds of trees which were called tobacco trees although they had no connection with tobacco.

There were a few white men about with damp red faces, in khaki coloured trousers, and shirts

quite unfastened. Two or three stood at the door of the bar.

John Oliver carried his rugs and portmanteau, and the boatman took the trunk, which he brought to the verandah outside the bar, received his tip and returned to the boat. John Oliver stood helplessly beside his luggage, and asked one of the men at the door to direct him to an hotel.

§ 3

The man smiled. "This is the hotel. I am the barman."

"I should like a room," said John Oliver.

"Both our rooms are occupied," said the barman. "The law requires us at least to keep two. So we keep two."

The other men at the door looked at John Oliver curiously, but offered no comment. Presently they went inside with the barman. One of them, at least, belonged obviously to the type of men who drink in summer to keep themselves cool, and in winter to keep themselves warm. The other was tall and bald with a bony red face and red moustache.

John Oliver sat down on a bench under the window—he sat on the same bench twelve years later—and looked at his luggage. He was unutterably hot and thirsty and disappointed. He would drink something, he thought, after the other men had finished. Through the window he saw them languidly throwing dice for drinks.

Then one of the men, who had a square, power-

ful body and short legs, beckoned to him. He went in.

"For God's sake," said the man, "Take your coat and collar off. What'll you have?"

John Oliver obeyed rather shyly the instructions about his coat and collar, and asked for a shandy.

"My name is Jones," the other continued. "He's McInerney"—he indicated his friend. "If you like I'll put you up while you have a look round."

"I'd be very much obliged," said John Oliver.

A grinning young Barolong whom Jones called Piet, and whose full name signified in Dutch that he had no bottle—Piet—Zonder-Bottel was the actual name—carried John Oliver's trunk, and Jones himself relieved John Oliver of his portmanteau.

A few minutes' walk brought them to a mud-house. The exterior ornamentation took the form of a window made of a solitary pane of glass. The house itself consisted of a living-room and a rudimentary kitchen. The living-room contained a bed, a table, two chairs, and a box on which stood a basin. A very small looking-glass hung over it. There was no ceiling and the floor was smeared with cow-dung.

Towards evening a young native woman put on to the table two plates, two knives, two forks, a bottle of pickles, and a loaf of bread. Then she brought in a basin of stew.

The last thing John Oliver wanted to eat on

that hot summer evening was a mess of stew, but he felt obliged to make the attempt.

After they had eaten, they brought their chairs outside, and Jones produced a bottle of F.C. Brandy. John Oliver wanted none, so Jones tried as best he could to finish it himself. As the brandy sank in the bottle and rose in Jones, Jones became eloquent.

"What a life it is!" he said, "What a life! Nothing to do but drink. Not a white woman about. These filthy blacks. These Annies."

John Oliver looked a weary sympathy.

"They ruin a man. Did you see that stew? Good God, what do we keep them for?"

John Oliver remembered the native girl who had prepared their meal. So that was it! His English complexion deepened.

Jones poured himself another glass.

"Don't you stay here." He held up a shaking monitory finger. "Clear out in time."

A glass later, as the words began to slur slowly from loose lips, he became confidential.

"There was a girl in England, Marjorie her name was. With yellow hair and blue eyes. Might have been a lot of little Joneses by now with yellow hair and blue eyes. But there was a black one with a woolly head. It died. Thank God."

He stood up in front of John Oliver.

"Clear out of it! I tell you, man, clear out. England's full of Marjories with yellow hair and blue eyes. Go back to them!"

John Oliver shook his head. "What am I going to do in England?" he said, voicing the plaint of that great host which has been called the Lost Legion. "I couldn't go back to an office. I want to belong to myself. I'll give this a trial anyhow."

But Jones had sat down again and was not listening to what he said. He was quiet for so long a time that John Oliver began to think he must have fallen asleep. He wondered what he was going to do about sleeping himself. Accommodation seemed limited. And he was very tired.

He touched Jones on the arm.

"Hey?" said Jones drowsily.

"I am awfully sorry to trouble you," said John Oliver. "What am I to do about sleeping?"

"Oh, take the bed. You'll find two mattresses on it. Throw one out for me. I'll sleep here. I never sleep inside. You'd better come outside too."

"I say," said John Oliver after a moment, "Wouldn't I be putting you out—you and——?" he stopped.

"You mean Annie? Annie's not her Kaffir name—I don't know her Kaffir name—but mostly we call them Annie. No, it's all right. Annie can go to the location."

Jones did not use his mattress at all that night. He slept as he was in his chair.

But John Oliver, although he had a mattress, did not sleep. The river clambered noisily over rocks in the bed, frogs croaked, mosquitos stung

him. He thought about diamonds and Jones and black Annies and white Marjories. Even outside it was very hot till about two or three o'clock. And then the moon rose and made the world grow too bright for sleep. In the distance, higher up the hill, the Kaffirs were dancing and singing all night long.

Words jumped into his mind. "Annie's not her Kaffir name . . . but mostly we call them Annie. . . ."

When he went down to the river at six o'clock in the morning the air was already hot.

CHAPTER II

§ 1

A few days later, John Oliver began digging in a small way. He had two "boys," whom he paid twelve shillings a week each, a windlass for hauling up stones and débris; a "baby"—which is a wooden contrivance for sorting and derives its name from its cradle-like motion; sieves, buckets, tubs, picks, and shovels. Digging was still primitive even in the first decade of the Nineteenth Century. To-day no digger thinks anything of himself unless before his eyes stands the sharp outline of a tall gear against the sky-line, unless he owns a score or two of boys, a motor-car or, at least, a motor-cycle, and perhaps a gramophone. Civilization has done much for the diggers, but nothing for the Diggings. Where there was a mound of débris fifteen years ago there are a dozen to-day; where perhaps a tree chanced fifteen years ago, none ventures to-day. But one fact has remained constant. Where, fifteen years ago, never a digger left the Diggings with a fortune, still, to-day, never a digger leaves the Diggings with a fortune. As a matter of fact, fortune or no fortune, a digger, once a digger, never leaves the Diggings at all. . . .

§ 2

So John Oliver had his boys, his windlass, his "baby," his sieves and buckets and tubs and picks

and shovels, his little triangular piece of tin for sorting. And his hopes. And he spent his days on a mound of débris, under a green-lined umbrella, watching his boys picking and shovelling to make a shaft. On his face, on his hands, and on his chest where his shirt was open, the skin was a dusky red and was peeling away.

As they worked his boys flung the sweat from their faces with their hands. And John Oliver looked at them and gloried in mastership.

He had the proverbial luck of the green-horn.

Jones, who had never struck a good claim for himself, had given him advice—innocently accepted and acted upon—about the locating of his claim. No other digger was anywhere near, but Jones, as he said, had a fancy for that place, and, one of these days, when he had got through his present ground, he meant to go there.

So John Oliver went to dig on the claim of Jones' choice. And, actually, in his second sieve, as the boy raised it wet and glistening from the tub, there, right in the centre, among the drab "bantams," lay a white, sharp-cut stone.

The boy grinned, delighted.

"Baas!" He pointed.

It was a diamond. And, a few days later, John Oliver got thirty-five pounds for it. He had besides for sale, at the same time, three small stones, barely a carat together—but still diamonds and saleable. . . .

The matter of diamond-digging seemed to John Oliver a very simple one. Here a fellow, it ap-

peared, could make over forty pounds a week by merely sitting under an umbrella in the sun——! He pitied his friends labouring at the old English tasks, and spoke enthusiastically to the older diggers. They seemed quite unmoved.

§ 3.

In summer work begins on the Diggings at half-past six. And at half-past six one morning John Oliver stood on his claim fresh from his bathe in the River, as exultant as a god on Olympus. He stood, on a small mound of débris, his brown hair still wet, his skin flushed by sun and water, and particularly on his rather high cheek-bones, his shirt open on his chest, his neck full and vigorous. A tentative breeze came across the River and he lifted his head to it. He felt at one with all that is young and happy in the world, and he looked as he felt.

As he stood there two young girls on horseback came slowly cantering along. Each had a camera slung from her shoulders. They stopped at John Oliver's claim. The elder was probably eighteen, the other a year or two younger. They were obviously sisters, were dressed more or less alike in blouses and short habit skirts, and wore their hair in a plait down the back.

John Oliver smiled at the two girls, and waited for them to speak. The elder was slender and graceful, had clear hazel eyes, and a shy delightful smile. The younger had less attraction. She was squarely built, her features were blunt.

But on the other hand, she somehow radiated character—a courageous, mutinous spirit, tempered with humour.

She spoke, and her voice was quick, very clear, and rather peremptory.

"You're new, aren't you?" she said.

"A month old," said John Oliver.

"You mean a month here. Do you like it?"

"Very much."

"That's a pity."

"A pity? why?"

"Because you'll stay too long."

"How long is too long?"

"It depends on the sort of man you are."

"Hester!" said the other girl.

Hester turned round. "Well, if I mayn't speak, come along then," she said.

"No, please don't go," begged John Oliver. "In common fairness you now have to tell me what sort of man you suppose I am."

Hester smiled a one-sided little smile.

"I never can mind my own business. But how am I to know what *is* my business?"

"I don't object to your minding mine," John Oliver smiled back.

"So you think something evil will happen to me if I remain here? There's a fellow I met the first day I arrived who gave me the same warning."

"Who was it?"

"A man called Jones."

"Jones?" said Hester. "Oh, yes, I know about

him. He's a good example of what happens to people on the Diggings."

Her sister made an uncomfortable movement.

"We'll have to be going along now," she said. "We're saying good-bye to the Diggings, and taking good-bye snaps of things" (she indicated the camera). "And we want to go all round Lost Hope and be home in time for breakfast."

"Where do you live?" asked John Oliver, descending from his mound.

"We live at Grant's Farm. You know, the next diggings. I am Alma Grant. This is my sister. But we are leaving for good next week."

For the first time John Oliver realized that there was loneliness on the Diggings.

"I am sorry," he said. "Life is splendid here, but I haven't any friends. I should have liked to meet you again. My name is John Oliver."

"I am sorry too we shan't meet again," said Hester. She held out a brown, unrefined little hand. "Well, good-bye. Don't stay too long. Good luck."

John Oliver clasped the frank hand.

"I hope I won't stay too long," he said earnestly. "Perhaps we shall come across one another some time in the future."

"Perhaps we shall," said Hester.

"Good luck and happiness to you too," said John Oliver.

Alma smiled her shy smile.

"Don't let Hester worry you, Mr Oliver. She's an awful croaker. Always foresees troubles.

Perhaps you will make your fortune here. Well, good-bye."

They turned off across the veld, and John Oliver stood looking after them. Suddenly the girl called Hester turned her horse's head and came cantering back to him.

"Would you like me to take your photo?" she said. "The light is quite good. Just stand on your heap."

"I'd like it very much," said John Oliver, and stood as she directed.

"If it turns out decently," said Hester, "I'll send you a copy from Cape Town." She hesitated a moment. "I hope I didn't offend you, did I? I mean by saying it depends on the kind of man you are. I know you're not that kind anyhow."

"It was good of you to warn me," said John Oliver. "I wish you were not going away."

"Well, make your fortune soon and come to Cape Town too."

They looked at one another with an open wistfulness of mutual attraction born of youth and the morning.

"I'll do that, be sure," promised John Oliver.

"Then till we meet again," said Hester, once more holding out her hand. "Look at Alma waiting there to scold me."

He took the proffered hand.

"I will come," he said. "I mean it you know. I will."

CHAPTER III

§ 1

John Oliver soon found that the social difference between the River Diggings and other places was that there Life did not exist in layers. Throughout the world humans were arbitrarily divided and struggled against the arbitrary divisions. Either they struggled state against state—in perpendicular blocks, pushing as it were side against side. Or they struggled, caste against caste, in horizontal strata, the lower pushing towards the upper, the upper thrusting down the lower.

But on the Diggings humanity was as mixed as—say—a newly-shuffled pack of cards from which the higher honours have been omitted. That is, there were small black cards and small red cards, and they jostled one another haphazard with here a knave and there a ten. But there were no aces, no kings, no queens; the scions of nobility were not as common as John Oliver had imagined from reading tales of mining-camps. The Diggings, in short, was a world of mixed small fry.

To begin with, no man came to the Diggings if he had something better to do. As a matter of fact, no man deliberately came to the Diggings

at all. He drifted down or was forced down. He came because he had no money, because he had lost his job, because he did not know what else to do. He stayed because nowhere else could the bowed head raise itself so high as on the Diggings; because nowhere else was the servant master; because nowhere else had incompetence a better chance; because nowhere else was money of so little consequence; because nowhere else were hopes cheaper.

These things being so, it seemed to John Oliver at first that life ought to be sweet on the River—but he discovered soon that it never was. Thus he learnt the lesson of the world—that the bowed head is difficult to raise, that the servant cannot be master, that incompetence has no chance after all, that money must be of some consequence, and that cheap hopes are worthless. That, in short, conventionality is the accepted heritage of tradition, because it is the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

It took John Oliver a very short time to arrive at the human composition of Lost Hope. There were the older diggers who had been there twenty years and would certainly be there another twenty years, because neither would they deliberately leave the Diggings nor would they, during that period, die. The life, open, untrammelled, utterly careless, was so healthy that, however hard he tried, no man ever managed to die there.

There were the later comers—men who had been there several years, who still talked vaguely

of going away, but who knew well enough in their hearts that they never would. Because when they were doing well they could not possibly tear themselves away from their luck till they had gradually returned to fortune what she had suddenly thrown at them; and because if they were not doing well they obviously had to wait until they should do better. And then there were the folk who had been born on the Diggings—the children of stray and very poor Dutch settlers; the natural half-caste offspring of the older diggers; here and there the family of a better-class farmer. Such people as, for instance, the Grants, whose farm was now a proclaimed Diggings, who were prosperous middle-class folk, sent their children away to school, and had their annual holidays.

Naturally, too, there were a few shop and hotel-keepers, possibly Jewish, whose business consisted in supplying the primitive needs of the natives, and in "trusting" the diggers, hope being generally the only asset the diggers had.

And, of course, there were eager recent arrivals of John Oliver's own type who saw in the Diggings a panorama of chances, who had nothing better to do certainly, but who also had never done anything worse.

And up the hill, in locations, lived the natives. John Oliver had hitherto known of only two kinds of natives. The glorified Zulus of romantic fiction—in his mind he saw them now, and always would, despite experience—as an aggregation of bronze statues; and the half-castes of Cape Town.

But here he found different natives—people small, brown, mongrel, degenerate, half-starved, diseased through and through, pathetically fatalistic and submissive and ignorant. These natives did not speak the deep gutteral tongue of the Zulus, their names did not sound like a challenge to battle. They spoke a mongrel Basuto, a depraved Dutch. Their names were parodies of Dutch names. They had one or two natural virtues—they were honest and generous, and if they had vices they were vicious as an animal is vicious, unmoral rather than immoral. They worked uncomplainingly for wages which, even for them, were not living wages; bred ceaselessly; lived so wretchedly that they were numb to their own misery; and died with the greatest ease and frequency, death being to them quite simply of the essence of the contract of life. A paternal Government, with no impertinent interference, gave them, if nothing else, at least full liberty to be sick and die in any way they chose.

They accepted religion from the missionaries with equanimity, and sang hymns (having, of course, no conception of their meaning) because the hymns went readily into part-songs. They bore their religion much as a faithful dog carries a stick—for the reason that they were told to do so, and since it was, after all, a bit of a lark.

Finally, through all their disease and filth and starvation and misery, they were not unhappy because they did not even know how to be unhappy; they sang and danced and laughed be-

cause somewhere in them there still lurked the divine capacity for joy.

§ 2

These then were the ingredients of the mixture that John Oliver found on the Diggings: any man who was a white man was naturally as good as the next man, no man being really too good. Any man who was more or less a white man considered himself a white man, certainly considered the black man a nigger, drank in the white bar and so amounted to a white man in the end. It was not quite possible to separate a man from his son even if the son showed a slight variation in pigment. On the other hand, a brown man with fuzzy hair went of his own accord to the black bar, but he probably had connections in the white bar, and was occasionally related to the natives in the black bar.

The really final distinction between black and white was the designation of the male adult. A grown-up person who claimed white connection was called a man. An admitted native never attained maturity in a white man's eyes. He remained a "boy" to the end of his days.

And then, of course, there was the occasional association of the white man and the black woman, either open and admitted, or else not open but certainly no secret.

So on the whole, it was, in reality, quite a thorough mixture. But, on the face of it, it was merely a case of any white man's being as good as

the next white man, and deserving all the kindness and all the forbearance of the next white man for just that reason. And there the matter ended.

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

Mr. Theophilus Grant was a nonentity, but fortunately for himself he did not realize it. He existed complacently in the state to which the Lord had called him, but he had never learnt accurately to define the boundaries of that state. Asked to nominate his calling, he would have said —did say—farmer. But, in fact, his position in life was merely that of husband and father. Further back it had been that of husband, father, and son-in-law. And still further back it had merely been that of son. In other words, Mr. Grant, in his youth had occupied himself in being his widowed mother's son. At the age of twenty-four a tuberculous tendency had shifted his scene of life from a comfortable, if narrow, home in a small English town, to the spacious farmhouse of a hospitable Boer who had met him in a Cape Town boarding-house and taken pity on his loneliness. Two years later, the tuberculous tendency well under control, he had married Mr. Terblanche's eldest daughter, Johanna, a large, silent capable young woman. Almost at the same time his mother had married again and found other interests and other avenues of expenditure.

Here then began a new phase in his career—a triple phase. Not only was he Johanna Ter-

blanche's husband and his children's parent, but, chiefly, he was his father-in-law's son-in-law. He lived under the patriarchal roof, shared the patriarchal destinies, and, nominally, assisted at the patriarchal fortunes. It was the very life for him, and he put on weight and self-importance.

When old Terblanche died he left the farm now called Grant's farm to his daughter Johanna, and thither she moved with her husband and her children—Alma, Hester and the little Ruth born, after the death of a short-lived only son, five years after Hester.

But nominally it was Mr. Grant who moved with his family to the farm and settled down to an ownership which no-one ever disputed. By not a word or gesture did his wife or any of her relations question his absolute position on the farm. It was not only Grant's farm—it was Mr. Grant's farm—"my place." It was Mr. Grant's farm and Mrs. Grant managed it while Mr. Grant basked in its progress. Mr. Grant was interested in everything except his own business. He had a smattering of information which was encyclopædic in width and microscopic in depth. He held strong conservative views and spoke on going in for politics some day. He could discourse volubly on every subject, and he found in his wife an accomplished listener. The young Terblanches had not been encouraged to speak unnecessarily, and Mrs. Grant had developed to perfection the art of audience, and had the capacity of looking at her husband with the utmost interest while he

spoke. Mr. Grant had never yet, in nineteen years of marital opportunity, discovered—or wondered—what his wife thought of during his monologues. And she herself was able to repeat his last few words assentingly when he stopped for appreciation. She was quiet and undemonstrative. And she was so capable that only the results showed how busy she was. It was on her initiative that, following the threat of ruin when Rinderpest destroyed all their cattle, the farm was prospected for diamonds, and proclaimed a public alluvial diggings. It was she who collected the percentages of the finds; laid down pipes and inaugurated the scheme for bringing water to the diggers, where before the diggers had had to go to the water; and assisted promising workers to buy the big gear that would a dozen-fold increase their output. It was she who constructed the pont on the River, and took toll from the waggons and carts that were saved a circuit of twenty miles by her enterprise. It was Mrs. Grant who, regretting her own small store of education, insisted on the best schooling for her daughters; and Mrs. Grant who always helped the poor strugglers around her. . . . She was the wife whose price is above rubies, but Mr. Grant did not know it, though he loved her, and he always considered himself somehow her superior. And, as a matter of fact, most people—even those whom Mrs. Grant herself had benefited—had the vague idea that Mrs. Grant was below her husband's level. His cultivated English and wide vocabulary, in

juxtaposition to her heavy Dutch accent and very simple choice of language, were probably at the root of the general impression. Even Alma and Hester in their very young days had considered their father the wisest and most admirable person in existence, distinctly more attractive than the useful but silent woman who acted while he talked. But during the last few years some hint of understanding had come to Hester. She was a stern young person who kept a clear grey-eyed view on the world, and was never anything but strong in her opinions—whether right or wrong. Her adherence swerved sharply from her father to her mother, and her mother accepted it as quietly as she had hitherto accepted her lesser portion of merely duty-grown love.

§ 2

It had been Mrs. Grant's wish of years that they should leave the Diggings. "We must live among people," she had always said. "The girls have no chance here."

Invariably Mr. Grant had demurred against this idea. It seemed to him unwomanly that a girl should seek her fate. In common with most weak men, he had very strong ideas on woman's sphere in life. Long after Mrs. Grant had begun quietly to elaborate her plans for their departure from the Diggings, her husband was still giving advice about a woman's place in the world. "The right man will come," he would say. "Let my girls

PUBLIC LIBRARY,
BRISTOL, CONN.

sit quietly on the stoep of the old farmhouse, and one day he will come."

"Yes, but Theophilus," said his wife, "do they come to the Diggings, the right men?"

"When the time comes, the man comes," her husband answered sententiously. "Look at your own case. Did you expect to marry me when you lived there on your father's farm, and saw no man from one year-end to another? Apparently you had no prospects. Yet you married."

Mrs. Grant offered no remark.

"Am I right?" demanded Mr. Grant.

"Yes, I married," agreed his wife.

"So there you are," commented Mr. Grant triumphantly, and proceeded to enlarge on cases of extraordinary matrimonial chances within his own experience, while his wife with her small, wise, grey eyes fixed on him, made mental calculations in money sums.

"I don't say," proceeded Mr. Grant, "that it isn't time we left the Diggings. For a man like me what opportunities are there for congenial intellectual intercourse here? I only protest against this idea of deliberately trying to settle the girls. On the other hand, it will always be a happiness to me to know that I have so managed our affairs that the girls shall never have to say they missed anything in life through their father's fault."

Mrs. Grant looked at him with a smile that was a little sad and a little tender, but wholly maternal.

Then she leaned forward and patted her husband's hand slowly.

"We have been very happy together, Theophilus," she said.

Mr. Grant looked at his wife with the sudden look of a boy in his eyes—it was that look perhaps that explained their whole married life—took the loving hand in his own, and kissed it.

CHAPTER V

§ 1

John Oliver had computed his yearly income on the basis of his first week's finds. After two or three months he left off calculating about his yearly income and began to be concerned about his daily bread. As if the whole affair of that first week's finds had been a trick, the washing and sorting days followed one another a blank after a blank.

At the end of three months John Oliver's staff was reduced to one "boy," and John Oliver's menu was reduced to mealie-meal porridge. At the end of another month John Oliver's last "boy" left him, and John Oliver sat on the bench —he was destined to sit often on that bench during varying circumstances—outside the bar, and felt a peculiar sensation in his stomach. And, in fact, John Oliver was hungry. His face was brown but it was thin, and he was unaware of the look in his eyes.

It was McInerney, the man whom he had met on his first day with Jones, he of the bald head and red moustache, who first noticed it.

"How's the luck?" he enquired in his deep, gentle voice.

"Off," said John Oliver.

"I never had any faith in Jones's inspirations," said McInerney. "How you found anything on that claim of yours to begin with I can't understand. I hope you've chucked it now."

"It's chucked me," confessed John Oliver with a wan smile.

"Amounts to the same thing," said McInerney, and added casually, "Have you thought of another place?"

John Oliver shook his head.

"Well, look here," said McInerney, "you've heard of this river-bed scheme?"

"Yes."

"We've formed a syndicate. We're going to start building a breakwater one of these days and pumping out the water. There'll be diamonds by the shovelfull in the bed. But just now, you know, I'm working on a biggish scale up on the flats. What with the River business it will be more than I'll be able to attend to by myself. I'll give you a share if you'd like to come in with me. What?"

John Oliver looked his assent.

"Have a drink," said McInerney, "and then we can go and take a bite up at my place, if you care to have a look at the latest mail-papers afterwards."

"I'll come," said John Oliver, "but I may as well tell you that the mail-papers won't be the chief attraction."

"I've been through it myself," said McInerney.

§ 2

There was a new interest in the lives of the Lost Hope diggers. The working of the river-bed. For years the thing had been dreamt of and spoken of, this year it was to happen. A syndicate of diggers had been formed to carry through the scheme. It was winter, and the river was at its lowest. Now, if ever, was the time to begin with the building of the breakwater.

The syndicate was not an affair of mighty company-promoters. It was the jealous property of small men. Any digger with a little ready-money was welcomed to it. Even Mr. Angove, the consumptive school-master, whose days were running out visibly, had his share in the syndicate. He had bought it with the savings of a lifetime—savings which worked out at the rate of a pound for a year of existence. He had put the matter before his silly, hard-working little wife. "As you like, dear," she had said, as she said invariably.

§ 3

Soon the breakwater was under way. The foundations were down. They were heaping sand-bags, rocks, mud. "Boys" were working lustily —yet not so lustily as they seemed—chanting and grunting as they dug and heaved in the almost dry bed of the river. Now the breakwater was high enough, and an oil-engine came to empty the pool. Diamond-buyers began to flock to the Dig-

gings in increasing numbers ("Like vultures," said one digger with a descriptive oath). Corrugated iron stores suddenly sprang up. A man from Johannesburg was going round making bids for shares. He approached McInerney who laughed at him. He went to James Angove.

"I know what you've put in. I'll give you double," he said.

Mr. Angove shook his head. "I am convinced the bed is rich."

"Convinced? Who convinced you?"

"I know as much as you know. And if you know nothing, why offer me double?"

"It's my business to take chances. You can't afford to do so. You aren't justified in risking your money." ("Damn it!" he thought the next moment, "that was rotten! A dying man!")

The teacher closed his eyes in terror.

"I must risk it!" he pleaded.

"Look here," said the Johannesburg man, "I'll play the game with you. I won't press you to sell. But if you feel inclined to do so, I'll give you a hundred and fifty. Think it over until to-morrow."

"Thank you," said Mr. Angove.

The day passed. He kept nine black hours of the night company. Yet, when morning came, he had arrived at no decision.

But his wife was in good spirits. For once she was positive.

"Guess what I dreamt!"

"Well?" he asked wearily.

"I saw you standing in the river-bed. Your hands were full of diamonds. You threw them up into the air and juggled with them. And you said to me, 'Mabel,' you said, 'what do you think of that, eh? I've got enough to play marbles with!' And I laughed. And you said, 'Mabel, this means a fortune for us. We're rich at last. . . .' "

"The man from Jo'burg offered me a hundred and fifty for my share," her husband said slowly.

"Well?" Mrs. Angove's voice was sharp.

"What shall I do?"

"Do? After a dream like that? You couldn't sell your share!"

"But the child, Mabel. Have you considered the child?"

"I'm thinking of the child. That dream was an omen."

Mr. Angove, torn between doubts, accepted gratefully some—any—positive advice.

The man from Johannesburg did not get his shares.

§ 4

The pool was dry. Babies and pick-axes and shovels had come to take their place in the river-bed. Here and there was one of the big gears Mrs. Grant was so strangely advocating. Kaffirs and bosses, busy as ants, were digging, heaving, washing, sorting. John Oliver felt that he could have thrown his head back and shouted for sheer joy of living and working and hoping.

From Kimberley, from Johannesburg, from all the neighbouring camps, men, as if newly awakened to a possibility, came to beg for a strip of land, for a claim, for half a share. Mad rumours flew around. Never was such a rush.

Early on the third morning a Kaffir turned over a huge stone, and bent down suddenly. Then he straightened himself.

"That's him, Baas!" he said, holding up a flat nine-carat.

The owner took it, and, putting it up to the light, examined it. The diggers nearest him stopped to look. They pressed near. He jerked his head barwards. A dozen diggers accepted the tacit invitation. His "boys" laid down their tools in cheerful anticipation. "Two bottles Cape," he said laconically. "I will see you later, Stoffel," he added to the man who had picked up the diamond.

The syndicate who, apart from the claims they worked themselves, received a royalty on all those they let, nodded with satisfaction at a good beginning.

Mr. Angove was beside himself with joy when he heard the news. He ran into his wife and waltzed her round ecstatically, and then sat down, laughing, choking and coughing on the bed, his blue eyes shining in his death-white face. When he could speak again he announced the find to his wife.

"The fifty-two pounds is coming back already," he gasped between bursts of coughing. "You'll

be rich yet, girlie. Perhaps I too. I feel as strong as a lion. Who can tell the ways of Providence?"

"What's about your particular share in this find?" asked Mrs. Angove.

The teacher thought a moment and sobered. "Well, I don't know exactly," he reckoned slowly. "Perhaps—say—twelve to fifteen shillings."

His face fell.

"It's a good beginning," his wife said cheerfully.

"Oh, of course! And wait till we find on our own claims."

But he remained somberly brooding.

During the next week a few small finds were made by the syndicate.

Then the skies overcast.

"Will it rain?" John Oliver enquired anxiously of an old native.

"No, Baas," he answered in the Taal. Then, after a moment, "But it is raining in the Transvaal." He pointed a lean brown finger to the distant hills.

"Well, what of it?" demanded John Oliver.

The "boy" spat some brown tobacco-juice in an expert shower from between his teeth, deliberately removed the old quid and stowed a new quid under his lower lip. Then he answered calmly.

"When it rains in the Transvaal the River rises."

John Oliver stood staring at him, his heart very still.

"And then?"

"The River comes down here, and we have a flood. The pool will be filled. The breakwaters will be washed away."

John Oliver made his way to McInerney.

"Is this true about the River?" he asked abruptly.

"Perhaps."

He met the teacher wandering desolately around.

"They say the River might come down," Mr. Angove said with white lips. "What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"God!" said James Angove.

Then fierce anger at his own impotence possessed him. Here, in the presence of all these brawny, muddy, sweating workers his frail white hands seemed to him the supreme degradation. He felt that he would have yielded everything he had or hoped for—the last remnant of his wasting life; by heaven, even his wife or child!—for one hour of full-blooded manhood, of lusty, brown strength.

He wanted to plunge the gravel-laden sieve into the cold, muddy water. He wanted to work the rhythmic-swinging "baby." He wanted to strike —and strike again—the rocky earth.

He bent down with stern determination to grasp a shovel . . . and found himself too weak to lift

it. He dropped it, tears of humilation and self-pity in his eyes.

John Oliver looked at him comprehendingly.

"Don't you worry, Angove. It will be all right."

But his voice carried no conviction.

Next day the sun appeared, and, irresistibly John Oliver's hopes rose with the barometer.

But McInerney was gloomy.

"It's no go, I'm afraid, old chap. It's raining in the Transvaal."

As a precautionary measure they were beginning to remove the earth to the banks of the River.

A week later a small Kaffir brought a wire to one of the diggers.

The others crowded round him anxiously.

"Vaal has risen three feet at Christiana."

They went stolidly to work again. A rise of three feet at Christiana might not affect them. But then again it might. Still, the River never came down in September. . . . Hope and fear clashed miserably in their hearts.

The old native shook his head wisely. He felt neither hope nor fear, he merely knew.

It was still raining in the Transvaal.

Two days later came another wire. "Vaal has risen eight feet at Warrenton and is still rising."

The diggers worked in desperate silence. One man—not of the company—found a twenty-seven carat stone. He was well out of danger.

Bulletins came frequently now. The River was

rising rapidly. There was, at best, hope only of a short respite.

Nearer, and stronger, and ever higher came the onrushing flood of water. Soon there was only one more day to work. Hope was gone.

And then the flood—a mass of water seven feet high—reached Lost Hope.

The diggers had removed the engine, their babies, and tools, and stood somberly on the bank. Mr. Angove was there, his face white and terrible in the golden sunshine, his eyes burning fiercely blue, like sudden dabs of paint on a white canvas, staring at the mighty mass of water, as it rushed on in over-bearing, down-sweeping force, carrying with it timber, and weeds, and débris, and fish; carrying, too, human efforts and expectations.

John Oliver turned to him with a smile that aped indifference.

"It's—a—fine—sight, isn't it?" said Mr. Angove hoarsely from dry lips . . . and fell, with scarcely a resisting stagger, to the ground.

They carried him home, Mrs. Angove sobbing beside him. As they laid him on the bed, she broke into a sharp cry of sudden illumination. Her philosophy of superstition had not failed her after all.

"That dream. Oh, I should have known! I should have remembered! Dreams always go by contraries."

§ 5

That night, for the first time in his life, John Oliver got recklessly and speechlessly drunk. So

did Jones and McInerney and many of the others.

Jones and McInerney had got drunk because it was the natural thing to do under the circumstances. And John Oliver had deliberately followed suit. A man could not take lying down such a blow of Fate as the flooding of the River. Some reply was obviously essential, and getting drunk was the only retort at hand. It seemed to John Oliver a somewhat feeble and inadequate retort, especially as he found no satisfaction in the act of drinking for its own sake, but he could think of nothing else to do.

He felt ill and miserable next day—too ill even to go to poor James Angove's funeral. And he lay on his stretcher and gave himself up to brooding. He dallied—not without melancholy satisfaction—with the worthlessness of life in general, and of his own life in particular. He put to himself the eternal questions of discomfited humanity—asked himself what was man, what was Fate, what was life or death, what was God or the Universe, found all the questions easily answerable with a single word "nothing," and having now no problem left to solve, passed from biliousness and philosophy into sleep.

He woke next morning to the dogged routine which is the digger's life, which no longer concerns itself with expectations and prospects, but which accepts good luck, or bad luck with equal nonchalance as part of the day's work.

John Oliver was a digger.

CHAPTER VI

§ 1

The days passed slowly and monotonously, merged indistinguishably one into the other, translated themselves into weeks, into months, into a year.

John Oliver settled down as McInerney's permanent partner. They had average luck, became good friends, sometimes drank too much, but, in general, led a quiet wholesome life.

Except that the Grants had left and that Mr. Angove's place was now taken by a woman, nothing had occured at Lost Hope since John Oliver had arrived on that hot summer's day. The prospect of a lady teacher had temporarily interested him. He anticipated something in the nature of the charming young school-marm of American fiction who comes to warm the hearts of the aliens from civilization "out west."

But Miss Wilson was not like that at all. She was very plain, and dull, and anæmic. Her colouring was of a negative fairness—she had a kind of blurred appearance.

Soon after she came John Oliver and McInerney took her for a walk. She giggled and talked unceasingly—was arch and affected—tried, with pitiful obviousness, to impress them.

Afterwards McInerney said to him, "Well, what do you think of her?"

John Oliver told him.

"Poor thing!" said McInerney, "It's hard to be a lonely, unattractive woman."

John Oliver felt somewhat ashamed of his own harsher criticism, but tried to pass it off with a laugh.

"You're very forgiving to Nature, McInerney."

"Well, I have to be. I'm no Adonis myself. And I don't know that I can flatter myself about much in my own character."

"You're a good chap, McInerney," John Oliver said.

§ 2

There was a wedding up at the location on the hill. The contracting parties were a middle-aged native couple. The man, Marthinus, worked for McInerney and Oliver, and had begged the honour of their attendance as spectators of the evening function. There was to be a "tea-meeting" at the location.

Marthinus and his bride had passed through the first flush of romance. They had already lived together twenty years and had grown-up children and a grand-child. Two of their daughters were—who more suitable?—bridesmaids.

Marthinus and Leah had not deliberately elected to remain in a state of what is called "sin." They had always hoped to be able to marry in the "Kerk," and to have a suitable wedding-party. Shortly after they began to live together, Marthi-

nus, the bridegroom, had commenced to save up money enough to buy his wedding-suit. He had first acquired a black coat. Then he had continued spasmodically to collect money for the trousers and waistcoat. But, in the meantime, his other every-day jacket had got worn out, and not having the cash in hand to replace it, he had to put into service the wedding-coat. So that by the time he had achieved the waistcoat and trousers, the unfortunate coat was no longer worthy the occasion. . . . And then, of course, there was the matter of the bride's garments. And the party. . . .

The advent of a family further complicated matters, and the ideal of a hallowed union began to grow rather dim through the veil of past unsanctified years.

But only a month ago Marthinus had picked up a good stone for his masters, had been given a donation of ten pounds, and was devoting the money to making an "honest woman" of Leah.

Marthinus' case was typical, if not quite invariable. Occasionally, on the contrary, the bridegroom paid, in advance, sheep or cattle for his bride. But with the rapid degeneracy of the River natives the custom was gradually vanishing, and generally unions occurred in accordance with the whims of Nature, and were mutually and openly recognised when a family began to arrive on the scene.

Meanwhile the couple lived more or less faithfully together in their hive-shaped hut of mud

and rushes and rags, brought forth sickly children, many of whom wisely died at the earliest opportunity, and sometimes talked vaguely of the day when they would marry in the "Kerk."

§ 3

There was a great celebration at the location. Nature was assisting at the function to the extent of a perfect evening and a magnificent full moon. All the natives for miles around were there, and were regaled with tea and coffee and cakes and meat and bread and Kaffir-beer. The young people danced and sang with increasing abandon as the evening wore on. The dances were, more or less, a terpsichorean version of "Here we go gathering nuts and may," or of "Oranges and Lemons." There was no dancing in couples.

The songs were generally adaptations of popular tunes or hymns. Occasionally they were simply a chance phrase excellently developed into a miniature oratorio. All the voices were wonderfully true. The men's voices were deep, and the deeper they were, the better they were considered. The women's voices were forced into stridency. The harmonies were deft and faultless.

The bride, in a white dress and veil, with orange-blossoms in her woolly hair, offered hospitality indiscriminately. One of her daughters brought some very muddy tea and bad cake to McInerney and Oliver and told them that her name was Annie. Afterwards when she was dancing she continually looked in their direction over her

shoulder. She was slim and lithe and graceful; and carried her head, as do all natives, regally. She was probably about seventeen years of age and had a small impudent face, set on a long neck, and a general demeanour of sly wantonness.

After they had been there an hour and a half McInerney suggested departure. They turned to go.

Suddenly Annie darted from the circle in which she was dancing, and addressed herself breathlessly to the two men.

"Does Baas want cook?"

"No," said McInerney shortly.

John Oliver mentally traversed six months of uneatable food prepared by his "boy."

"Can you really cook?" he asked doubtfully.

"I cook already for lots of Baases. I cook very good," was the unhesitating assurance.

"Well, come along to-morrow. I'll see what you can do," said John Oliver.

"I don't believe she can cook," said McInerney as they walked home. "I don't like the look of her either."

"She can't be any worse than Solomon," John Oliver answered. "And if she is no good, she'll go."

Annie, however, did not go.

CHAPTER VII

§ 1

It was raining one day as McInerney passed the school-house on his way home from work. And it struck him that it might be a good idea to partake of Miss Wilson's hospitality and shelter.

The school-house was a corrugated-iron building consisting of one long room, to which was attached another very small room for the teacher's use.

McInerney knocked at the front door of the school, and, getting no response, opened it and walked in. It was not, as one might have supposed, a very difficult matter to open the door, since it had a natural tendency that way, and, in fact, presented obstacles only when it came to be closed.

As McInerney sat down on the bench which was, during school-hours, inhabited by the second standard, a small sound began to associate itself in his senses with the sound of the rain beating on the iron roof. He walked down the room, and knocked on the half-open door which connected Miss Wilson's private and official life. He heard a hurried movement. "Just a minute, please," said Miss Wilson's rather high voice. And presently it added, "Come in."

McInerney walked in.

"Oh!" said Miss Wilson, her white face colour-

ing, and her hand going up to her pale hair, "I thought it was one of the children."

"I came in from the rain," said McInerney.

His eyes travelled curiously around Miss Wilson's home. They had not a great distance to go. The room was about ten or eleven feet square, lined with boards, and, despite the rain outside, very hot. There were in it a bed, a table, a chair, and three boxes draped with cretonne; on which stood, respectively, a small looking-glass and some simple toilet things, an enamel jug and basin, and a small paraffin-stove. A few prints were nailed to the walls, and there was a mat on the ground beside the bed. The only personal evidences of Miss Wilson's habitation were some freshly-darned stockings lying in little balls on the bed. The careful neatness of the ugly little room struck McInerney as very pathetic.

"Won't you get a chair from the school-room and I'll make you some tea?" said Miss Wilson brightly.

"Thanks," said McInerney.

Miss Wilson lifted the cretonne curtain from the box which represented her kitchen, and brought forth a kettle which was already filled, a teapot, sugar, milk, and some cups and saucers and teaspoons. She lit the paraffin-stove. Then, from behind the cretonne which covered the wash-stand box, she brought out a small cloth, which she put on the table, and some biscuits.

"This must be a lonely life for you," said McInerney suddenly.

"I have always lived a lonely life," said Miss Wilson attempting feebly her customary little laugh.

"It's not the life for a woman."

"It's the only life I have ever managed to get hold of." Her lips trembled as she answered. "You know, I was out of a place for two months before I got this."

"Have you no people?"

She shook her head.

For a moment both were silent.

Then McInerney spoke slowly. "I heard you crying."

Miss Wilson made a sound which pathetically resembled a giggle, her white face grew red as only very light-complexioned faces can.

She tried to say something, made an effort to control herself, and began all at once to cry with deep, hard sobs.

McInerney sat motionlessly watching her.

The kettle began to boil, and, after a moment, McInerney got up from his chair and carefully made some tea. He put sugar and milk into the cups, and poured out two strong cups of tea.

Then he touched Miss Wilson on the shoulder. "Have a little tea," he said in his quiet, deep, voice. "Please!"

Miss Wilson shook her head without raising it. "I don't want any."

"Have some to please me. You're always such a plucky little woman. Come along."

Miss Wilson looked at him with red eyes from

which the tears were still slowly falling and attempted a smile.

"You make me feel plucky," she said. "I don't know why I cried."

"I know," said McInerney. "Here's your tea. . . . There, that's better."

Miss Wilson felt like a small girl. It was a feeling she had not known for twenty years, and it was not an unpleasant feeling.

"Of course, I understand," said McInerney. "You're lonely. I'm lonely too."

"Not as lonely as I am," said Miss Wilson. "I'm thirty-two, and I'm plain. I can't do the sort of things pretty women can do without making a fool of myself. And at the same time I have the same nature and I can't help doing them. No one will ever marry me, and sometimes when I think of what will happen when I can't get work any longer I wish I were dead." The tears welled up again, and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief. "Nobody," she continued, "knows how frightened I get living here in this little room by myself. I have a revolver. But sometimes I lie awake the whole night listening for noises." She gave a little sob. "And then people despise me for—just for having a hard time. Oh, it's different being a man."

"Not so very different," said McInerney.

They finished their tea in silence. The rain was gradually lessening.

McInerney rose.

"A man can feel lonely too," he said. He

smiled, and Miss Wilson found beauty in his rough-hewn bony face. "Let's help one another to be less lonely," he said.

§ 2

McInerney during the next few months saw less of John Oliver and more of Miss Wilson; and John Oliver saw less of McInerney and more of the bar. There were consequences to each, and John Oliver looked at his partner with a furtive eye, when, as they were walking down to the River for a bathe one evening, McInerney abruptly said to him: "I want to speak to you about something, John."

John Oliver remained silent.

"It won't be a surprise to you, of course. Miss Wilson and I are going to Kimberley next week to get married."

As John Oliver still did not speak, he turned to him almost wistfully. "Aren't you congratulating me?" he asked.

"Of course," said John Oliver in a toneless voice.

"It will make a difference to you too," said McInerney, as eagerly as a boy, "having a real home to come to. Won't it?" And continued, oblivious of the other's lack of response. "You won't appreciate her wonderful qualities till you get to know her. Wait, my boy. When you see how happy we are you'll want to follow our example."

"No, I won't," said John Oliver with violence.

"John," said McInerney gravely, "It would be a wise thing for you to do. Or else to get away. The life here is too dangerous."

"Jones told me the same thing the day I came. So did someone else soon after. I wish to God I could. But how can I?"

"Haven't you the will?" said McInerney.

"Oh, yes, I've the will all right," answered John Oliver with a bitter smile. "But I can't find the way."

§ 3

As John Oliver passed the bar on his way home from the River, the barman, standing at the door, waved something at him.

"Here's a letter for you from the hotel bag," he shouted.

John Oliver took it and looked without recognition at the writing on the envelope. He opened it as he sauntered home along his shrub-dotted lane, and pulled out a single sheet of paper folded around a card. He read it quickly:

"Dear Mr. Oliver,—I am very sorry not to have sent you your snap before. It was lost in the muddle of moving, and I found it only two days ago. It isn't so bad, is it? I hope you have been very lucky—we don't hear any River news nowadays.

"Yours sincerely,

"Hester Grant."

"P. S. I wonder if you have left the Diggings after all."

John Oliver looked at the snapshot Hester Grant had taken of him two years ago. He was standing on the mound behind his first shaft, his head high to the world, a smile on his face, his hair lifted by the breeze. There was hope in every line of his body.

John Oliver's face grew pale, he tore the picture violently across, and dropped it where he stood. Then he went along his way. But after a few yards he stopped and came slowly back, searching the ground in the growing dusk. He found the two halves of the snapshot and began to rummage in his trouser pockets for some stamps he knew he had. He discovered them presently in his shirt-pocket, and, holding the two torn pieces carefully together he stuck the stamps on the back of the photograph across the sharp tear.

§ 4

When John Oliver arrived at the iron shanty he called "home"—it was a room in every respect similiar to the room in which Jones had first welcomed him to the Diggings—he found his plate, his knife and fork and bread and pickles waiting ready for him, as Jones's had waited. Annie was in the little shelter that did for kitchen, bending over a three-legged pot of stew just like the stew he had eaten at Jones's invitation two years ago.

"Annie!" he said.

Annie looked up with a broad smile.

"Get up!" he said savagely. "Clear out!"

He was repeating the words of Jones.

CHAPTER VIII

§ 1

Towards the end of the year a half-caste child was born in the location. It was welcomed with great pleasure by numerous maternal relations.

These are, roughly, two classes of natives. The first class views with terror the intrusion of white blood. The second regards the whole business either with indifference or with satisfaction. The second class is the degenerate class.

A fortnight after the child's birth there was a big celebration—friends and relations came to dance and to feast. In front of the dirty hive-shaped hut sat Annie in a gay print dress holding the baby on her lap. A circle of native women and a few men sat about on the dung-smeared yard. A crowd of little naked children wandered around. Some fowls and dogs whose miserable, under-fed appearance justly earned for them their title of Kaffir-fowls and Kaffir-dogs, strolled in and out. Three-legged pots of stew with mealie-meal cakes in them lent diversity of odour to the general atmosphere. There was plenty of Kaffir-beer to add to the gaiety of things.

Annie was, and felt herself to be, the heroine of the occasion. Her mother, Leah, herself a last year's bride, as the ladies' papers might have put

it, was delightfully officiating in her grandmaternal capacity.

John Oliver's money was paying for the feast.

§ 2

John Oliver was sitting beside the River meditating suicide. He had played with the idea often during the last year. But even while he held the thought most strongly, he knew in his heart that a certain cowardice would prevent him from doing violence to his body. . . . After all, he put it to himself, death was no satisfaction, no reparation. Some day he would leave the Diggings and let the future bury the past. Once clear of the River, he had as much hope of proving himself as any other man. . . .

In the meantime, he ate his bread in solitude. He was afraid of the looks—half-amused, half-contemptuous—which might meet him. He was particularly afraid of McInerney's quiet, deep voice. The thing was no secret. He knew that everyone knew.

But finally he found his way to the bar again, and thus back to his fellows. He went to work as usual, and waited passionately for McInerney to say something to him. But gradually he came to understand that McInerney intended to leave the subject unchallenged, did not want to preach and reprimand, and also did not want to hear explanations and repinings.

He realized, while he was dumbly waiting for the verdict that never came, how deeply he craved

his partner's friendship. And he made to himself secret vows of abstinence and repentance.

Destiny was against his keeping them.

Annie appeared at his house one hot day. He had not seen her since the birth of the child.

"Baas, baby very sick."

He put his hand in his pocket.

"Here. Get a doctor."

He walked away.

"Baas, come see baby."

Almost against his will he followed her over heaps of débris, past shafts and tobacco-trees, over the drab-green summer earth, to the hut.

He stooped his head to look into the ragged, evil-smelling hut. The child—a small reddish child—was evidently very ill, and was wailing spasmodically. He could hardly breathe in the hut. It seemed to him it would be murder to leave the child there. A painful feeling, tinged with hatred, was in his breast.

"You'd better bring it over to the house," he said curtly to Annie.

Annie brought the child and herself over to John Oliver's house.

The child recovered, but Annie did not leave the house again.

§ 3

About a year later, McInerney, fresh returned with his wife and child from a holiday in Cape Town, said to John Oliver:

"You haven't been near us for a very great while, John."

"No," said John Oliver. "Your wife wouldn't wish me to."

His guess was not quite wrong, but McInerney ignored it.

"You ought," he said, in a burst of paternal enthusiasm, "to come and have a look at the McInerney."

"I haven't time," John Oliver muttered weakly.

"Nonsense, man. Come along."

McInerney led John Oliver to the neat three-roomed brick house he had built soon after his marriage. Mrs. McInerney's taste was not of the highly cultivated kind—her fancy led her to small ornaments and lacy effects—but the place was bright and clean and cheerful—it was, obviously, a home.

And Mrs. McInerney herself had changed surprisingly. She had achieved her desire, was settled in life, no further needed to employ arts of allurement for which she had so pathetically little natural capacity. She had instead acquired the matron's poise—had lost her irritating affectation of sprightliness, her nervous, persistent giggle. And she was no longer thin and pale. In short, she had become, if not a fascinating, beautiful woman, at least, a pleasant, homely little body!

"Hey, Mother," McInerney shouted as soon as he entered the house, "Bring out the McInerney. Let's have a look at him."

Mrs. McInerney disappeared into the bedroom, and emerged in a moment with a big, fat fellow in

her arms, who leaped at her with grasping fists, smiled a wide wet smile punctuated with two new teeth, and chuckled with astounding joviality. His head was covered with bright red curls and his cheeks were scarlet with health.

"I know what you're thinking," said Mrs. McInerney with a smile. "You're wondering where Frank and I got him from."

John Oliver found himself smiling back, an aching comparison in his heart.

"They made such a fuss of him at Muizenburg," Mrs. McInerney continued. "Miss Grant said he was the finest child she had ever seen."

"Did you meet the Grants there?" John Oliver asked quickly.

"Oh yes, they were down, the whole family. I like the eldest Miss Grant particularly. Such a pleasant girl. But will you excuse me, Mr. Oliver? The McInerney has to go to bed."

"Hadn't the Grants left before you arrived?" said McInerney.

"No, they left shortly after. I suppose," added John Oliver, "The girls have plenty of admirers."

"Well, Alma seemed very popular. But Hester has a sharp tongue. And men don't like sharp tongues. Oh, by the way, of course you must have met them! One of them asked after you. I think it was Hester."

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if you were still here, and how you were getting on."

"And you said?"

"I don't remember quite what I said. I believe I just told her you were my partner."

"Nothing else?"

"What else?"

"I suppose," said John Oliver slowly after a moment, "I'm the sort of person of whom the less said the better."

McInerney did not answer. Then, "for God's sake, John, get away from here," he broke out.

"Too late," said John Oliver.

CHAPTER IX

§ 1

The McInerneys were right. Alma Grant had developed into a charming young woman. She was slight and graceful, had a shy, delightful smile and naturally perfect manners. Before she had been in Cape Town six months she had an admirer. She accepted him with an air of good-humoured toleration.

George Buckle lacked the romantic essentials. He was about twenty-three years of age, short and rather stout. He had light eyebrows and eyelashes, and a fair, heavy freckled face. His features were regular—if you came to look at them consideringly, his nose, mouth and chin were well-cut. But then no one ever thought of associating any form of beauty with George Buckle, and the shape of his nose, mouth, and chin had never attracted prolonged observation.

He had met Alma Grant at a tennis party, and had immediately attached himself to her in a manner so heavy and serious that it was almost like a parody of his whole personality. He now called to see her two or three times every week, and had established himself as her unfailing escort.

He was obviously "courting" Alma with all the old-fashioned tenacity that the term itself has come to stand for. He used to sit somberly in an

armchair in a corner and watch Alma throughout an evening, rising to leave regularly with the words, "Well, I must be going now."

Hester at once expressed his attitude in a teasing remark to her sister.

"Poor old George seems to find being in love with you a very depressing business, Alma. You seem to have a painful effect on him."

At which Alma had merely smiled her pretty smile.

"Don't you say anything about my old George. He's the best fellow there is."

"Do you take him seriously, Alma? You wouldn't like to be engaged to a person like George!"

"Perhaps I would. Didn't I always tell you my ideal had white eyebrows and eye-lashes? Why, that's the way I knew my fate. As soon as I saw George, I said, 'There he is!' "

"Don't talk nonsense, Alma."

Alma laughed.

§ 2

Yet there is no knowing how far George Buckle's method of slow and silent absorption might not have carried him into Alma's life if he had not himself been the unconscious means to his own end.

For Alma's sake he had lately learnt dancing, and one night he had prevailed on her to accompany him and a girl-cousin to a College dance.

The girl-cousin proved to be a gay, hail-fellow-well-met young undergraduate person who, within

five minutes of her arrival at their destination, was lost to Alma in a maze of popularity.

George hovered around Alma rather helplessly. Her programme still held many blank spaces when he put a nervous arm around her waist for the first dance. Alma knew within the moment that George could not dance, and probably never would. Their progress from the beginning took the form of a struggle. Alma hoped no one was watching, hoped people would have the discrimination to know that their grotesque manœuvres down the room were not due to her own incompetence; wished passionately that she had not come. George's fair, heavy face turned a brick-red, she felt his hand tremble against her waist.

He stopped abruptly.

"I'm no good. I'm making you ridiculous. We had better leave off."

He took Alma to a seat.

"I am very sorry, Alma. I brought you here to enjoy yourself. I thought I could do better."

Alma protested unconvincingly that she preferred sitting out.

"But you didn't come here to sit out. I must find you some other partners. My cousin is abominably selfish. She might have looked after you a bit."

It was during the third dance that George suddenly said to her:

"Do you know van Reede?"

"Who is van Reede?" Alma asked without interest.

"You see that tall fair chap speaking to my cousin?"

George directed her gaze towards the end of the room. The man speaking to George's cousin was easily the tallest and most striking figure in the room. He radiated a sparkling vitality. His hair was fair and shining, his skin glowing, his eyes bright blue behind their pince-nez, his features well-cut, his laugh magnetic.

"Shall I introduce him to you? We were at College together. He has been there for years. He was a year ahead of me when I arrived. I finished three years ago, and he is only leaving now. But he's good at some things, you know. Music and painting and things like that."

"He sounds interesting."

"Well, I suppose he is. Girls like him anyway. But he's not quite my kind."

Involuntarily Alma looked from him to van Reede. George smiled his rare, heavy smile.

"I suppose you think that's unfortunate for me. I see he has left my cousin. Shall I bring him along?"

Alma saw van Reede clap George on the back and laugh. Presently he looked indifferently in her direction, continued to look while the indifference faded, and in a moment was accompanying George towards her.

§ 3

For years Alma carried the memory of that evening. René van Reede was so typically the

ideal of a girl's dreams. He bore himself like a hero of romance. He fitted his part so triumphantly that it was impossible to judge whether his attitude was instinctive or acquired, but naturally he had the right temperament. He was gay, he was sombre, he was daring, he was humble, he was thoughtless, he was considerate. All so swiftly in succession, that his moods passed in a flash and mingled.

He was of that rare and yet distinct type of South African in whom various blends of French and Dutch blood have combined to produce a peculiar result. He was lazy, artistic, impractical, interesting, enthusiastic; had a genuine appreciation of good music; was an eager follower of all modern art and literature; and leaned towards forward-moving ideas. On the other hand he himself hated work, was not concerned about being self-supporting, and wrecked on a desert island, would probably have starved.

Alma always came back in her mind to the intent look in his blue eyes. How characteristic of him that was!

She had begun by being aghast, and had ended by being acquiescent, at the way he had juggled with the conventionalities. They had danced together one number after another. And then he had taken her to a little bench under a tree, and had talked to her fitfully but intimately. After a while she had remonstrated—mildly enough. "But what about George?"

"Oh, George!" he had said. And then "Let us

forget him. And all the rest of them—all the Georges in the world. Let us be perfectly reckless. Or don't you want to be perfectly reckless?"

And he looked at her a little mockingly, a little anxiously, from behind his pince-nez.

It had seemed absurd not to be perfectly reckless.

But how badly she had treated poor old George! At her first dance with René he had slipped from her consciousness as completely as if he had never existed. And then he had appeared before her suddenly between dances and had asked her bravely if she were enjoying herself—if he could bring her an ice or do anything else for her. And she, conscious-troubled, had said to him: "But aren't you going to ask me to dance with you again?"

He had smiled wistfully. "Not for anything in the world. But if you want to be generous, you can sit out the next with me."

And then she had forgotten!

She had not seen George again until it was time to go home . . . In the meantime she had lived a life-time—or perhaps only a second. René had told her things—strange scraps of confidences. She had been thrilled to receive them, but had judged her own life too uninteresting to make any return.

He had spoken to her of music and poetry. "I have written scraps myself. Not much good though. Would you like to see one or two?"

She had accepted eagerly, but when he sent them

to her a few days later she had found it hard not to be disappointed. His poems were worse than he had suggested—a weight of words, uninspired, imitative.

But then, how he understood and appreciated the poetry of others! For years afterwards she was reading what he had casually mentioned that night.

They had sat for nearly an hour under the tree. Had spoken of life and of love and of the stars.

He had said to her, as all young things do sooner or later: "Do you ever think of yourself as an insignificant atom in the universe?"

She had answered that she did.

"Then don't. Why shouldn't you think of yourself as the whole universe? After all, when you die, the universe ceases to exist as far as you are concerned. Doesn't it?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"But it's happier. You don't feel so insignificant. . . ."

Presently he had added: "So you are a universe. And I am a universe. And each other person is a universe to himself." And after a pause, "But when a man and a woman love they have a mutual universe."

Alma had felt slightly bewildered. And he had looked at her with his intent, smiling gaze and said:

"Do you believe that? Do you believe in love?"

"I think so," she had answered.

"In love at first sight?"

"I don't know."

"Why not? The law of attraction runs through everything. Say you believe in first sight love."

"Why?"

"I want to hear you say it."

"But I am not sure." (And yet she had been very sure).

They had not spoken for a few moments.

Then he had looked at her again with that slightly smiling, compelling look of his.

"Well?" he had said.

And he had kissed her.

Incongruously Alma had found herself wondering at the moment when, traditionally, she should have been dead to all the world beside, whether she was feeling as she should at the first kiss of love.

Then she had stood up.

"I have to go home with George."

To her surprise the words came shakily. She had thought herself very calm.

He had stood up too.

"Would you rather?"

She had nodded.

"Where do you live? I shall come to-morrow."

They had walked towards the ball-room.

And then he had whispered suddenly: "Do you believe now?"

In the early hours of the morning Alma lay wondering whether such dreams continued by daylight.

CHAPTER X

§ 1

René came at about five o'clock the next afternoon. Ruth, who was playing on the verandah, ushered him in.

"Does Miss Grant live here?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ruth. "Won't you come inside? I'll call her."

Alma came at once. He held the hand she welcomed him with, and smiled into her eyes.

"Do you feel strange about me?" he asked.

She smiled back. "A little. How do you know?"

"I thought you might."

Ruth was hovering as unostentatiously as possible near the open door.

"Let us sit down. Have you had tea?" said Alma.

"Will your little sister go and see about it?" suggested René gravely.

"Ruth, go and see cook about some tea for Mr. van Reede," said Alma.

Ruth disappeared regretfully.

After a moment René said: "Well, on reflection, are you sorry you consented to be reckless?"

"No," said Alma.

"Are you glad I came to-day?"

"Yes."

"You're a dear," said René, and his voice quivered a little.

It was after they had had tea that René, remarked suddenly: "I'm going to England next week."

Alma sat very still.

"I am going to study medicine. I might be away for five years without a break. It depends on funds. My uncle is financing me. I have wasted more of his money than I need have in the past. I am not—much good, Alma."

Still Alma said nothing.

"Will you write to me, Alma?"

"Yes, if you want me to."

"Well, we have a week. Would you consider a week a long time or a little time?"

"It seems—a little time sometimes," said Alma, her grey eyes clear and frank.

"It depends how you think of it. Let us try to think it a long time."

"If you think a week a long time how long is five years?" She smiled slightly.

"Why, a little time—when the world is upside down," he smiled back. "Yet a lot may happen in five years. Will a lot happen to you in the five years I am away, Alma?"

"No, I don't think so," said Alma.

"And you'll write to me regularly?"

"I'll answer whenever you write."

Alma watched him walk down the road as he left. For the first time she realized the wistfulness of life.

§ 2

With the regularity that drew the comment of her family, René laid the days of his final week at Alma's feet. Alma accepted whatever he had to offer in the spirit of quiet recklessness that had characterised their whole companionship. She lived her every-day life in a manner that was almost subconscious, thrilling into active being only when René entered her sphere of existence. . . . She received the parental admonition with a cheerful acquiescence that was quite impenetrable.

Two or three times René brought his violin. Music was probably the only study that had really appealed to him, and he played well. Yet, apparently, he lacked the spiritual and mental stamina—the will to succeed—that might have made him a great musician.

He had mentioned his violin casually to Alma at his second visit. "Do your people care for music? Shall I play to them to-morrow?"

The simple way in which he had assumed that it was a perfectly reasonable and natural thing to pay Alma daily visits struck even Alma as surprising.

For a long time afterwards the place near the piano where René stood and played his violin carried inevitably to Alma the suggestion of his presence. Hester, who was a better musician than Alma, accompanied him, and, invariably, as he raised his bow to begin, he looked at Alma with his intent blue eyes and smiled slightly. He was

a temperamental player and played for and at her until she was in an almost hypnotic state.

Once, as he was playing, George Buckle came in.

Afterwards he said: "You play very well, van Reede. I hear you are leaving for England shortly."

"In a few days' time."

George spent the rest of an unusually short visit discussing politics with Mr. Grant.

Then he rose to go. As he said goodnight, he turned to René. "I had better say good-bye to you, van Reede. I shan't see you again before you leave. Well, I wish you luck."

Hester saw him to the door.

"When are you coming again, George?"

"I don't know," said George.

§ 3

And then, before Alma could realize it, René had sailed for England. She was surprised at herself to find that, although she thought of him all day—both of his presence and of his absence—she was not positively unhappy. She surrounded herself with a haze of romance, gave her soul up to memories and anticipations, and waited for his first letter.

§ 4

It came from Madeira and was indubitably a love-letter. "My Dear," it began. And Alma read it very quickly through, her eyes shining, her throat dry, and her elbows and knees very weak.

Then she read it again more slowly. Again; and many times again. It was the first love-letter she had ever received, and it seemed to her, somehow, more full of meaning than words spoken could be. Alma was gradually discovering for herself that she lived more strongly in the spirit than in the flesh. She could not answer René's letter, but she waited for his next from England and his address with it.

It came rather later than she had expected, and it came carrying a note of depression. "I am feeling very despondent," wrote René. "I am not looking forward to my five years here with any satisfaction. I am not a student by nature; nor a physican by temperament. But I had to do something, and my uncle suggested medicine. Now I feel I shall be a failure at it. Could you love a man who was a failure, Alma? I wish we were not so separated by space of time and space of water. You seem very far away from me."

The letter troubled Alma. She answered it with as much comfort as she could gather, and hoped another letter would come soon written in a more cheerful mood.

But no letter came soon written in a more cheerful mood. In fact, no letter, cheerful or uncheerful, soon or late, came at all.

EASTERN CONNECTICUT
STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY
WILLIMANTIC, CONN.

CHAPTER XI

§ 1

About a month after René had sailed for England, Hester said suddenly to Alma: "Have you noticed that George doesn't come here any more?"

"Yes. He hasn't been for some time, has he?"

"Over a month. And I don't suppose he will come again either."

"Oh, perhaps he will," said Alma indifferently.

But they did not see him at all for another month. Then Alma, happy with her second—and, although she did not know it, her last—letter from René, ran across him in Cape Town's principle thoroughfare, Adderley Street. They almost touched one another in passing.

"Oh, George!" she cried, and stopped before him.

"How are you?" said George rather stiffly.

"Why do we never see you any more?" said Alma, her larger happiness embracing the world in its sympathies.

George's square face grew red. "I don't know," he muttered.

"Do come up again soon," said Alma.

The red deepened in George's face. "Thanks."

"Thanks yes, or thanks no? Don't be silly, George. Do come."

"I thought—perhaps I shouldn't. But if you want me to I will." There was a tone in his voice which Alma newly understood.

"Yes, I want you to come. Come soon."

As she left him, Alma wondered whether, after all, she should have insisted on his coming again. She had asked him in pure sympathy. But was pure sympathy what he wanted? "Well, he knows about René," she comforted herself; and, her mind having turned to René again, she forgot George.

§ 2

The months passed. George had resumed his regular visits to the Grants. René had not written again. And no one ever mentioned him to Alma now.

At first this very tactfulness hurt Alma. Why should people be afraid to speak his name in her presence as if it were a delicate subject—a topic to be hushed up? She refused to admit to herself that there was anything inexplicable in René's silence. A letter had gone astray, something had happened to him, unconsciously she had offended him. Even this last possibility she desperately, but hopefully, considered.

And she wrote to him again, two or three little nervous letters, studiously calm, almost cold little letters, asking why he had not answered, whether he was well, if she had perhaps said something to hurt him. Only in later years did she realize how those cold letters betrayed her warmth, how

clearly the careful politeness showed her apprehension.

And she grew a little quieter and thinner in those days. Then, since there was nothing else to do, she took up her existence as René had left it to her.

It was George who first, and quite deliberately, brought up the subject of René before Alma again. He had walked home with her after a game of tennis, and they were sitting on the bench under the old mulberry tree in front of the house. There was a little silence and then George said slowly:

"Have you heard from van Reede at all, Alma?"

"Once or twice," Alma answered, the blood mounting to her face.

"Lately?"

"Not lately." She was pale again now. "But why do you ask me?"

"I wanted to know."

She flashed up unexpectedly. "I don't see why I should answer you. You haven't any right to ask me questions."

"Yes, that is so," admitted George, and relapsed into quietness.

After a moment he looked Alma firmly in the face.

"Look here, Alma, I introduced van Reede to you. I wish I hadn't. But it's past now and can't be helped. You found van Reede—very attractive, of course. All girls do. Well, it may

be bad taste and bad manners for me to say anything disparaging about van Reede to you. But I am not going to let you spoil your life for the sake of that—posing flirt''—he spoke the words at her calmly. ''If I can help it, I mean. And I tell you, if I know van Reede—and I do know him—you won't hear from him again, and you had better forget him.''

He was speaking to her as surely and containedly as a doctor to a patient—and there was something almost as professionally scientific in his manner. It helped her to keep her faculties steady. She met his gaze with a self-possession of a patient nerved to hear an unfavourable diagnosis. And when he had finished she stood up.

''I suppose you mean well, George. But I don't want to see you again.''

He stood up too.

''Of course you resent what I said. I knew you would. But I had to say it. I couldn't keep on coming here knowing all the time that you were thinking of this other fellow who has forgotten you.''

''I didn't ask you to come.''

''If you will remember, that is just what you did do.''

She remembered. Yes, it was true. She had asked him.

''But you misunderstood the invitation,'' she said, and wondered why she was continuing the conversation, why her indignation could not support a stronger anger. Then it came into her

head that George probably scorned her for her position in regard to René, she the seeker, he the elusive sought-after.

"I hate you, George," she cried.

George smiled faintly, but there was pain in his eyes. "You are hating the wrong person, Alma."

§ 3

"Girls find him attractive," repeated Alma to herself as she lay in the dark that night and saw herself one of an army of foolish votaresses. "Girls find him attractive. And he despises them for it. He despises me."

And then the sheer magnetism of the man sprang into her mind. For very desire, she willed herself to believe in him, letter or no letter. Her memory gathered together every smallest incident of that wonderful week, every look and gesture and word and inflection. "Oh, no, he can't have forgotten me like that! There must be some explanation."

She clung forlornly to the hope of an explanation. But none came.

§ 4

There was again a break in the relationship between George and the Grants. For months they did not see him. And then it was Ruth who lured him back. She brought him home with her from school very delightedly one day.

"Look who's here, Mother. I met him just

outside the school, and I made him come along. We've been missing you awfully, you know, George. No one gives me decent sweets any more."

George was very red, but his manner was quite calm. "How are you, Mrs. Grant?" he said, took the offered chair, and became instantly one of the old circle again.

At first he and Alma met merely on the plane of civility. But gradually, across the family table, things moved back to the old friendly terms, and soon he was, as ever, the unofficial but unfailing escort of the two elder Grant girls.

It seemed to everyone now only a matter of time. To everyone including even George and Alma themselves. And it was as if the matter were practically settled when George one day brought them the news that his father had offered him a partnership in his business, and that he was now going over to take charge of their Johannesburg branch.

"Is it a big thing for you, George?" asked Mr. Grant with a pleased look of intimate interest.

"Oh, quite. We control several small agencies besides the two insurance companies. Yes. I should rather think it's a big thing for a fellow of twenty-five. I am only surprised he thinks I can do it."

There was something almost like excitement showing through his usual stolidity, and he looked across at Alma. She found her heart beginning to work quickly. Now she was to decide finally.

It was simply a question of opportunity, and then, she knew well, she was to be faced with the inevitable question.

She felt the eyes of the family on her. They all considered this affair of George to be an understood thing. That whole evening she sat in unconscious silence. But every now and then, unexpectedly, her heart began its sharp knocking.

§ 5

The opportunity came soon enough. George saw to that in his quiet, deliberate way. And then he said to her: "Well, I shall soon be going to Johannesburg now, Alma."

She murmured a conventional remark.

"Won't you—come with me, Alma?"

Only his anxious eyes betrayed his feeling. His face remained steady almost to impassivity.

Here it was. And she had not her answer quite ready. Of course, it was only a matter of giving that answer—but then, what was she to say?

"Alma!"

She found her tongue difficult to move.

"Aren't you going to say yes?"

"I don't know."

"Haven't you thought of it at all—of me?" His voice, as well as his eyes, was now charged with anxiety.

"Oh, George, I don't know!"

"But you knew all the time how I felt."

"I can't make up my mind."

"Then it's no use. You don't care," he said heavily.

"I do care," she remonstrated.

He shook his head slightly. "But not that way. I can see."

He sat for a few minutes staring vaguely before him, while Alma sat next to him, troubled and uncertain.

Presently he spoke again.

"You don't care the right way, I know. But do you care—enough—for a basis? I would be content with that if I couldn't get more. I want you so much."

For a moment Alma saw through the controlled exterior to the moving force within. She thought to herself that a woman could rely on George in the future years. But the right answer would not come. George gently touched her hand. She moved it involuntarily.

"I'll tell you to-morrow, George," she said hastily.

But they both knew it was useless.

In due course George left Cape Town for Johannesburg with the wrong answer for company. But he wrote to Mrs. Grant from Johannesburg, thanking her for her many kindnesses, and he sent to the appreciative Ruth a very large box of chocolates.

It was Ruth from whom admonition came with the grave finality of the first teens.

"You should have had George, Alma. He's decent. No one else is as decent as George. I expect you'll be sorry one day."

"Perhaps I shall," said Alma heavy in spirit.

CHAPTER XII

§ 1

There followed for the Grant family a period singularly devoid of incident—a period inactive and unproductive. Yet considering how slowly the days passed it was astonishing how quickly they translated themselves into weeks, into months,—even into years. For the very reason that each day was like any other day it crawled past unheeded and unmarked, joined its companions silently, gathered recruits on the way, and reappeared suddenly a unit of that battalion of Time which is called a Year.

And as the years passed Hester Grant made a gradual discovery. By the time she was twenty-four years old she had already deliberately acknowledged to herself that she was destined to be one of those women who have no admirers—one of those women who go without the thrills of youth. She had her dreams and hopes and ideals, but no young men, desirable or even undesirable, came along with words of admiration and promises of devotion to fulfil them. She could not understand it. She felt herself not more undeserving of a woman's lot than most other women she came across.

Indeed, it sometimes puzzled her how any man

with the right of choice could so disadvantageously use his prerogative. And yet however men chose, well or badly, of all the men who had the power to choose, no man seemed to want to choose her. . . .

She began to see life as a procession moving along in "two and two . . . the male and the female, as God had commanded," but passing by, here and there, one who stood aside mateless.

There grew in her heart slowly a feeling of envy towards Alma. Little nagging scenes—repented in a fury of self-contempt immediately afterwards—often took place.

For Alma, as ever, had many admirers. People spoke of her invariably as a delightful girl. That was the precise word for her—delightful. She was delightful to look at, she had delightful manners. It was a delight to be with her. That shy, unaffected smile of hers was extraordinarily alluring. . . . Often it seemed that she was on the very verge of what her mother called "settling down". But she remained unmarried.

The reason puzzled her as much as it puzzled any one else. It had nothing to do with René van Reede. She felt that definitely René was no more to her now than a strange dream. She no longer loved him, she hardly ever thought of him. But it simply happened that she loved no other man either, that she had no inclination towards marriage. She herself wondered why. It could not be, she felt certain, that René had shocked all power of emotion from her. She had, she ad-

mitted to herself, gone through a period of excitement, and then a period of depression, but they had not been so stressful as to deaden all other sensation in her. . . . Yet, though she looked upon marriage as her natural destiny, she could not bring herself to grasp that destiny.

§ 2

Four years after he had gone to Johannesburg, George Buckle came on a holiday to Cape Town. He came to visit the Grants—the same old George, as they all said—but with an added something of strength, of self-confidence, about him. He was beginning to wear the look of a man who directs other men. Alma felt that she liked him thoroughly—so thoroughly that she could almost believe the feeling she had for him must, after all, be the right thing,

But he did not seem to want to discuss the matter at all. Not, in fact, until the day he was due to return to Johannesburg.

Then he said: "Well, Alma, have I any hope?"

Very nearly George had the answer he wanted this time.

Alma hesitated a moment, and then the idea of love in connection with George sprang away from her almost fiercely.

She shook her head. "I am sorry, George."

"I knew it," he answered. "I should not have spoken. I meant not to. But Alma, if you ever change your mind will you let me know?"

That evening Mrs. Grant put her arm round her

daughter's shoulder as they sat on the verandah after dinner. She was an undemonstrative woman, and the action was almost shy.

"Did George say anything to you?"

Alma nodded.

"Why don't you marry him?" Mrs. Grant asked. "It would make me very happy. There is no man I would rather have as my son-in-law. George is a good man, Alma."

"I know," said Alma. "I wish I could. But the idea—I can't, Mother. I just can't."

Mrs. Grant was a woman of silent wisdom, and she patted her daughter's shoulder gently.

"It happens that way sometimes, child. Don't worry about it. You will be happy yet."

"I am happy with you now, Mother."

"That is not the happiness I want you to have. We have to look ahead, my dear. Mothers—don't stay."

§ 3

Very often afterwards Alma thought of the direct prophecy of her mother's last words to her.

As her own mother before her, Mrs. Grant passed quietly that night from the little sleep of life to the big sleep of death.

The morning found Theophilus Grant a widower. He sat in the arm-chair in a corner of the room, small, grey, helpless, terribly surprised. Now and then he moistened his dry lips; his hands trembled on his knee; otherwise he sat motionless.

It was Hester who took charge of him, and not

only of him, but of the whole frightened family. And it was on Hester that the responsibility as virtual head of the family eventually fell.

Only now did she realize how thorough was her mother's silent dominance, how negligible the personality of her father.

But in one respect Mr. Grant held sway—and that the chief respect. By mutual will, he inherited the whole of his wife's possessions.

CHAPTER XIII

§ 1

There was no doubt about it. John Oliver was going down. From the time when, as a matter of duty, he had allowed Annie to bring their sick child from the abomination of the hut she lived in to his small corrugated iron house, she had remained on.

And John Oliver arrived finally at the stage where he persuaded himself that he no longer cared. Things were so bad that they could not get any worse. And since they could not get any worse, they might as well go on as they were. In the meanwhile Annie did his cooking and looked after him in a fashion. He settled down to the life. In time he even became accustomed—or, at least, indifferent—to her habitual unsavouriness. He lost his sense of delicacy—his plunge in the river ceased to be a daily habit. There was no use in being clean among unclean surroundings. His daily shave became, first, a bi-weekly, then a weekly, and, finally, an altogether haphazard affair. He was beginning to drink with intermittent fury. He still had flashes of after-drunken repentance which he vented in futile sarcasm on Annie and on himself, and which she did not, in the least, understand; although, from her own point of view, she answered him back quite adequately.

But, in general, the stream of life passed over him as the Vaal River in front of his house passed over the inert black rock lying in the bed of it.

§ 2

He was one of those diggers who seem destined to be unfortunate. Now and then he found a small stone. But, as a rule, it barely sufficed to pay off his debts in store and bar; and, except that, as it were, it renewed his credit, it was, in any larger sense, useless. And household expenses had increased. Maggie, his first child, (Annie had called her Maggie, and as far as he was concerned, she might as well be called Maggie as anything else) did not remain the solitary representative of the younger generation in the little house overlooking the river. In time she acquired a brother and two sisters of different shades of brownness, but all, except herself, of the same negroid fuzziness of hair.

Maggie, in fact, was not strikingly unlike a white child. She had grey eyes and a clear yellowish skin that might have passed for merely a sallow complexion. And, although her lips were thick, her nose and chin were quite European. When she was seven some momentary parental impulse had induced John Oliver to send her to the small government school. But when, two years later, he made her take the next child, Jimmy, to school with her, they were both sent home on account of Jimmy's blackness.

He took the matter philosophically—philosophy

being the natural concomitant of impotence. . . .

But another reason for increased expenditure in the Oliver household was Annie's growing affection for strong drink. John Oliver accepted the fact as a not unjust retribution on him for his own habits.

Life was becoming increasingly unpleasant. But then he had given up expecting anything from Life. . . .

So in time he became one of the old inhabitants of Lost Hope. McInerney was still there living through periods of varying fortunes, but never prosperous enough to be able to give up the Diggings for another sphere of life. He and John Oliver were no longer working in partnership, and, in fact, they saw very little of one another. Which, under the circumstances, was a perfectly natural state of affairs, and John Oliver had grown indifferent enough not to resent it.

Jones was still there, and him John Oliver saw rather more frequently. Jones had suddenly one day been stricken with religion, had told his black girl to go, had entirely given up drink, and now spent his days in hard, but unfortunately still quite profitless, labour in his claim, and his nights in reading the Bible. He went round doing unappreciated missionary work among the diggers, preaching the Gospel, his revelation, the contentment of a virtuous life, and the happiness of a secure future in the world to come. He was a constant visitor at the Oliver household, and since John Oliver listened to him with the grave qui-

essence that was the result of his utter lack of interest, Jones lived in the gratifying hope of ultimately saving his soul.

But, on the whole, John Oliver spent his existence in solitude, even drinking within the bounds of his own house, and approaching a fellow-digger only when there was a chance of borrowing a book or paper. . . . Yet his world was with him. Once or twice when times were so hard that the whole Oliver family was living simply on a little mealie-meal porridge, the other diggers combined to give them some assistance. They never knew what John Oliver thought of their fellowship, for he approached no other man for months after, and never, in the years to come, mentioned it. But they understood well enough that gratitude lay beneath the outer covering of pride and shame.

Once, during a time of particular stress, the store-keeper's wife had given the Oliver children some old clothes that had once belonged to her own children. When Maggie, who had been the direct recipient of the gift, brought the clothes home her father had done what seemed to her an extraordinary thing. He had thrown them into the river and said: "If any of you take another thing from anyone, I will wring your little ugly black necks. You understand?" "Yes, Pa," Maggie had answered in deep wonder.

They had, however, gone around half-naked for the next two months.

§ 3

With the advent, and the growing cheapness, of the motor-car, the Diggings, unfed by any railway, were gradually undergrowing a change. The motor-car connected the diggers with town-life, and vivified their whole existence.

Ideas generally were growing larger on the Diggings. Work proceeded on a different scale. Where before a man had employed a few natives and had struggled, with the assistance of a windlass, a pick and shovel and "baby," primitively to wring a living from the rocky earth, he now employed scores of "boys," worked with a complicated gear, owned an engine, a washing-machine, and, quite possibly, a car of his own: almost certainly a motor-cycle.

But this involved, naturally, a re-adjustment of classes. Not every penniless digger could suddenly become the owner of expensive machinery. What actually happened was that there began a system of a few big men who financed comparatively large schemes, and of many small men who were "supported" by the big men—that is, who worked for them on a partnership basis. Sometimes the local shop-keepers—generally Jews—were in this position of "supporting" one or two diggers. . . . Then again the accessible motor-car had another effect. As soon as a digger could manage to find two guarantees of a thousand pounds each and a small sum of money in part-payment for the car, he became, instead of a dig-

ger, a buyer—either for himself, or for a company. Here there was a fair chance of making money, and there was a decided social lift in travelling luxuriously, well-dressed, and with a chauffeur, from camp to camp buying diamonds for hard cash, instead of standing in shirt-sleeves waiting for "luck". . . . And the motor had a social side too. A lucky digger might now run enjoyably into town—Kimberley would probably be the town—within an hour or two, breathe the limited air of the Diamond-city, and return to work next day; where in earlier times such an excursion would have involved a tedious, and probably a persistently deferred, journey by post-cart. So that where previously a digger had left his diggings once in two or three years, he now went away perhaps once a month.

What applied to the digger applied in a certain degree too to his women-folk—such women-folk as there were. But only, after all, in a certain degree—in a degree as, say, the changing of fashion in dress. With few exceptions, women on the Diggings were always a somewhat negligible quantity. White women were at a premium. As soon as a white or very slightly coloured female child began to show a disposition to grow up she was struggled for and speedily married. But, on the other hand, the time was already beginning to come when the digger looked elsewhere than in his digging-camp for a wife.

These changes passed by John Oliver and a few other derelicts of his kind. Quite possibly

the other diggers were no better than he was. But still they made pretensions to be better. And pretensions are at least an imitation of the real thing, and in so much better than utter negation.

CHAPTER XIV

§ 1

Every Sunday Jones passed on to John Oliver the weekly edition of the Kimberley paper, which he himself received and read on Saturday afternoon. And John Oliver, unless he happened at the time to be in the throes of one of those fits of drunkenness which attacked him periodically, read through the accumulated news of the week from blue cover to blue cover. Not because news of any kind interested him at all vividly, but simply because it was a habit that passed away a certain portion of time.

As regards this passing of time, John Oliver, particularly during the flashes of clarity which followed a drunken bout, was in two minds. Sometimes, in sudden terror, he saw life slipping away from him before he had had one little satisfied grip at it. But sometimes—and generally—there seemed to him an utterly weary mass of days and weeks and months to be lived through before one came to the sweet oblivion of final rest. . . .

Towards the end of July, 1914, John Oliver made his first big find in twelve years. Unexpectedly, in a claim which had never produced anything, on the very last day he had decided to give it before abandoning it (and even this against the advice of his partner and supporter, the local shop-keeper)

he came upon a great discoloured diamond staring at him from the middle of a sieve of bantams. The diamond weighed just over a hundred carats, and after being submitted to several buyers realized nine hundred and twenty pounds. And when John Oliver had yielded up his half to his partner, and paid off the various debts in shop and bar of over a year, he found himself left with three hundred and thirty-five pounds.

It was the first time since his second or third year on the diggings that he was thoroughly solvent. The relief of it overwhelmed him. For John Oliver, brought up in a household of strict economies, had never lost a certain inbred feeling for money orderliness. His condition of chronic hard-upness, as much as anything else, had contributed to the negligence of his existence. He had found nothing worth while in a state of perpetual petty debt and poverty—nothing to do but sink passively lower and lower.

Now here he had money. He went home clutching a little parcel of bank-notes in an old tobacco-bag. In the exhilaration of the moment, he gave Annie a note for five pounds. She had never had as much money in her life before, and she spent it without hesitation.

In an hour she was thoroughly drunk.

To escape from the consequent disturbance at home John Oliver went to the bar himself. At the bar were men who during many years had stood him drinks in the fitful glitter of their own brief periods of prosperity. It was incumbent on

him to return their hospitality. Unavoidably he had to drink himself. And within an hour he too was drunk. And once drunk, as was his habit, he continued drunk.

§ 2

It was not till about the middle of August that John Oliver began feebly to recognise that a war was being fought in Europe. He had not seen his weekly paper for three weeks. And even when he pulled himself together sufficiently to read more or less coherently the news, it conveyed very little to him—less, say, than the Wars of the Roses which he remembered from the history lessons of his school days. The feeling at Lost Hope generally was one of pleasurable excitement. Something interesting was happening in the world. One digger—it was said he had been a Captain in the Regulars, but then military titles are too frequent to occasion comment on the Diggings—packed up his few belongings quietly, and proceeded overseas. He left fairly heavy debts outstanding at the bar and store, but that, after all, was of very little consequence to anybody unconnected with bar and store; and when next he was heard of, having always had a talent with the cricket-ball, he was very thoroughly and efficiently an instructor in bomb-throwing, and now, quite without doubt, a Captain in Kitchener's Army. In fact, on being sent to the trenches nine months later, he was mentioned in despatches for some remarkable achievement with bombs. When last

heard of he was a Major looking forward to his battalion.

But although the weekly paper lashed itself to a fury of words, emotion stirred very feebly in John Oliver's heart. If he had known the quotation he would have said with Tennyson's lover: "Shall I weep if a Poland fall, shall I shriek if a Hungary fail?"—and left it at that—as he left everything.

Now he sat in the winter sun of Africa on the shining black stone outside his iron house, looking idly at the river, his digestion rather out of temper after its month-long association with an almost exclusive diet of strong drink, angry and contemptuous of himself, angry and contemptuous of the world, his anger and contempt the only sparks of light within him. Neither the pride of struggle on the one hand, nor the horror of the war on the other hand, meant anything to him.

Botha was taking an army to German South-West Africa. He was putting into force the Defence Act. There was argument as to whether the Defence Force might be used for aggression. But the Germans had crossed the border, people said. . . . The diggers were beginning to join regiments and commandos for German West. . . .

However, what about it all? John Oliver was perfectly indifferent one way or another. He was not concerned with the continuance of civilization or the discontinuance of civilized peoples.

The days passed on towards summer. John

Oliver's three hundred and thirty-five pounds were dwindling.

§ 3

One night the drought of the winter months broke, and all next day it rained steadily. There was no thunder or hail or lightning, but only the heavy drops falling thick and hard on the tents; hammering on the iron roofs; bending the slender stems of the tobacco-trees beneath their weight, making brown puddles of the roads; loosening the hard-baked ground. The sheep and cows huddled their drought-eaten bodies together in their slushy, dungy kraals where each movement left a hole a foot deep, but no other living thing was out-of-doors. Those diggers who had roofs above their heads listened to the din the rain made, and thought themselves fortunate compared with the men who had to fight through such weather. They drank and read intermittenly to pass the time. The men in tents watched their canvas walls beating inwards and envied their friends who owned roofs.

In the native locations, the hive-shaped huts of old tins and sacks of mud and rushes became more and more cheerfully noisy and evil-smelling as the day wore on; and part-songs were shouted from asphyxiating harmonious throats. The little naked, round-bellied, sore-eyed children clambered among their close-packed elders on the dung-smeared floors and joined gravely in the choruses.

There was no work done on the diggings all day.

But towards evening the rain began to weaken, the clouds began to lift near the horizon, a green-blue ridge appeared above the distant hills, and the sun, gleaming forth suddenly, made of the whole West a thing of glory. An etching of pale-gold defined the ridge of green-blue, deepening to orange, darkening to red, drifting to purple, dying away into the grey of all the skies. Behind the hills the rays of the sun opened out into a fan-shaped splendour that was reflected in fainter shades by the brown river. For a moment there was a golden haze over the world. The muddy pools were lit up, the iron roofs glistened, the wet-green weeds showed bright. There rose into the air the warm smell of rain-sweetened earth. . . . The rain lessened to a faint tinkle on the roofs and stopped. There was a lowing from the kraals, ducks splashed into the water, dogs ran out to bark. Tent-flaps were lifted and doors opened. In a short time the bar at Lost Hope was filled with muddy boots and the smell of damp clothes. The counter was besieged, the dice-box rattled for drinks. There was a medley of talk and laughter and cheerful cursing. The rain had lightened parched bodies and souls.

In John Oliver's house his four half-caste children ceased the undisciplined noise that their father occasionally punctuated with a blow or a threat. Their mother, Annie, had been spending the day in the location. As the rain stopped they rushed out bare-foot to play in the puddles.

John Oliver stood at his door and watched the shifting reflection of the gold-streaked West on the river. He walked up a small heap of dèbris and looked at the glory of the setting sun. As its colours deepened and softened and passed away gently something of the soul of the evening entered into him. There grew in him a vague tenderness towards the world, an undefined hope in something better to come. He had, as it were, a moment of poetic feeling. Somehow magically he might still realize the good in himself; by some miracle of fate he might yet find happiness. . . . Soft in spirit, he mused. . . .

There came to his senses gradual realisation of an approaching noise. Two figures were running towards him. They came nearer, and he saw that they were native women, and very drunk. The one in front stumbled over a stone and fell, and the pursuing one was on her in a moment. The fugitive managed to rise to her feet and counter-attacked. They flew at one another and were locked in a furious embrace of tooth and claw. Soon they were surrounded by a dancing crowd of women and children who egged them on in shouting enjoyment of the spectacle. The combatants screamed at each other invective of an almost inconceivable grossness. John Oliver gathered that one had insulted the other's character and revenge was being sought. He had recognized the women immediately. The fleeing one was Annie, the avengeful soul a cousin and boon-companion of hers.

In a moment they had torn off one another every shred of clothing on the upper body. The naked brown skins glistened in the last rays of the setting sun. Annie's eye was already swollen and black. Her opponent was bleeding liberally from nose and mouth. . . .

John Oliver turned away abruptly and walked down his heap. Presently he found himself at the bar. He had arrived there without conscious volition, brought by his accustomed legs.

The crowd of diggers was still there—among others, Jones and McInerney.

"Hallo, John!" said McInerney," what's the excitement?"

"Excitement?" repeated John Oliver vaguely.

"You look excited," said McInerney.

"I'm not," said John Oliver, and believed he was speaking the truth. "I'm past excitement."

"You only think you are." Jones put in. "But if you want any, you can get plenty outside the Diggings for the asking." John Oliver did not answer.

"I'll tell you what's up." continued Jones. "What I'm doing here in the bar. I'm going to find a score of men here at Lost Hope to join van Lelieveld's commando. I reckon I can do it easily. There's five here now in the bar coming along." A light pierced John Oliver's mind. For a moment his world ceased motion. He had made the decision of his life.

He spoke in a voice of dead calm which sounded far away to his own ears.

"I'll make the sixth." he said. "When do you leave?"

"Next week."

"Good for you, John," said McInerney. "I wish I could go. There'll be something to tell when you chaps come back."

"I'm not coming back," said John Oliver. And the blood commenced pumping its way back into his face.

§ 4

"And what about your family?" said McInerney abruptly to John Oliver as he walked beside him towards the little house.

"My family," said John Oliver clearly and succinctly, "be damned!"

They walked on a little distance in silence.

"Don't you feel any responsibility?" asked McInerney.

"None whatever."

The matter seemed to be settled, and McInerney turned the conversation on to the War. He found John Oliver answering absently. They relapsed into silence. Then John Oliver said:

"Those children are the outcome of all that is worst in me. I want to leave them and forget them. I am only thirty-five. I have time to begin life over again."

McInerney thought of his own red-headed freckled little son and his small daughter.

"Haven't you any feelings of a father towards

them?" he asked, voicing a subject of frequent wonder.

"I supported them while I lived with them, if that is what you mean. But if you think I love them and delight in their existence and talk baby-talk to them you are wrong, of course. Good God, McInerney, if you had sense, you would ask me how I kept my hands off murdering the lot instead of gibbering about 'responsibility!'"

McInerney projected his lower lip. Then he spoke determinedly. "I don't know that your way of talking isn't worse than your way of living. I hope you're not blaming Fate for what you've done yourself. Nobody ever compelled you to spend the best years of your life living with a coloured woman and producing coloured children. It's no credit to you that you haven't ill-treated them. I'm not congratulating you on your decency, John."

For a moment passion frowned in John Oliver's face. Then he laughed.

"You're always right, McInerney. But nothing in the world is going to keep me from getting something out of life—except, perhaps, a German bullet. First of all, I don't believe my staying on here and leading a dog's life is going to help Annie or the children or myself or the world in general. And, second of all, if you want to know, I don't care if it does or not. I'm leaving for good. I say, for good. They can keep the few pounds I have. But I don't want to see them or hear of them again. I'm going to live as if

they don't exist. Those twelve years I passed here are years lost from my life and I'm not going to spend the rest of my life searching after them. I tell you, McInerney," he was shouting now without either of them realizing it, "I tell you, I've come to feel suddenly that I'm a free man. Nobody will take my freedom from me. I'm a free man, McInerney. And I'm not coming back."

"It's not my business after all," said McInerney. They walked a few paces. Then John Oliver said in a quieter tone: "You needn't think I don't know that what I have done is worse, in a way, than murder. I've thought of it often enough. When you've murdered a man you've murdered him, and there's the end of it. But I've started a sin that's going on for generation after generation, and nothing anyone can do can stop it now. It's worse than murder and I deserve worse than hanging. But as things are nobody can punish me for it. And I swear to you, McInerney, I'm not going to let it interfere with anything good that may be coming to me."

They had arrived at the little heap outside the iron house. It was now quite dark, but McInerney, looking closely, could still see dimly the flabby cheeks and deep lines of the wasted years on John Oliver's face. And, yet, he thought to himself queerly, there were many better-living men that had worse faces.

"I could almost wish you luck, John," he said. . . .

CHAPTER XV

§ 1

John Oliver delayed the communication of his resolve to Annie until the next day. He came in from work in the evening, and said, looking at her swollen face, and closed eye with undisguised loathing, "Annie, I am going away to fight."

"You can go," answered Annie in the Taal, not knowing when and where, and not troubling to ask.

"I'm not coming back."

Annie betrayed neither sorrow nor astonishment. And the language that came to her lips had no bearing at all on the matter. She cursed merely because it was habitual with her to curse. Quite probably she did not grasp John Oliver's intention. But grasping it would have made little difference. She would have still employed precisely the same words, and the situation would in no way have been changed. . . .

That night John Oliver looked at his children as they slept, and wondered in a detached manner how those small brown woolly-haired savages came to be in that relation to him. He searched his mind deliberately for any feeling of tenderness towards them, some sensation of regret at leav-

ing them. But they inspired him with not even a personal sentiment. He bore them neither goodwill nor ill-will. He looked at their woolly-heads as a stranger might have looked who deplored their existence as evidence of a white man's degradation.

A white man's degradation.

John Oliver went outside and climbed the little débris heap which was his favourite resort at times when the combined smell of Annie and household dirt and dung-smeared floor overpowered his European senses.

What of those twelve years at Lost Hope? Why had he never before torn himself away? At times he had thought of it, but always lack of money and generally weakness of will had stood in the way. What, he had always asked himself, was a man without trade, profession or money to do outside the River Diggings? To work for a master, to be ordered about? No, there was only one hope. The big diamond that would set him on his feet and open to him again the gates of the outside world. And the big diamond had not come for twelve years. But not even the hundred and two carat diamond of over a month ago had represented the ideal of his dreams. It was certainly big enough, yet when he had found it he had felt that it presented no solution after all. He had had to give the storekeeper half, and to pay out so much for old debts. . . . And afterwards, what remained of it? . . .

But now the War. That was the heaven-sent

opportunity. Any man in khaki belonged to the great khaki community and there the world stopped. No one in khaki questioned the past or considered the future. To be in khaki was an end in itself.

John Oliver admitted to himself quite frankly that no impulse of patriotism moved him. He had missed the facts about the beginning of the War, and except that the violation of Belgium's neutrality had something to do with it, he had very little knowledge as regards the ideals he was presently going to maintain. As far as he was concerned the War was his opportunity. It had found him at the right time and in the right mood, and he was now as impatient to leave the Diggings as for many years he had been slothfully patient enough to remain there. . . .

§ 2

Once in khaki and away from Lost Hope John Oliver was a different man. Among men who knew him only in khaki, a man as good as any other man.

He had decided not to join van Lelieveld's commando after all. That was no way to break with the old life. He did not want to be in constant touch with Jones and the other recruits from Lost Hope. They were a part of Lost Hope—a part of that existence he wanted to lose behind him. On whatever spot in the world there stood a man who had known him in Lost Hope, there stood, as far

as John Oliver was concerned, a man on unhallowed ground.

A revulsion against his life on the Diggings was growing on him day by day. Simultaneously there sprang up in him a loathing for anyone black, a disgust for sexual irregularity. And he had joined another regiment instead.

He came to be known among his comrades as a quiet man who never spoke about himself but was always prepared to listen sympathetically to the confidences of others. His tent-mates described him "as a fellow who likes to do you a good turn". When they told one another jokes he smiled occasionally as he smoked his meditative pipe, but sometimes when the jokes were at what the men considered their brightest, he strolled unobtrusively away.

He was surprised and secretly elated to find himself rather popular than otherwise. The training that he had acquired in the Boer War, although he had arrived in South Africa too late to fight, came back to him easily, and soon attracted attention. Within a few weeks he found himself a corporal, and by the time his regiment left for Upington his efficiency, coupled with a certain grave seniority of manner, had achieved for him the rank of second-lieutenant. Commissions were often granted for less.

The exultant feeling that welled up within him at this sign of his triumphant evolution from the old life almost hurt him physically.

§ 3

It was in German West that he experienced another favourable turn of Fortune's wheel. That was at Upington on the border, where a force of mounted regiments were camped. He, a senior officer, a young fellow called Pitt, also a second-lieutenant, and a small party of men had gone out to reconnoitre. Pitt was a weak, rather pasty-faced boy of nineteen or twenty—by no means an expert horseman, and, in fact, hardly the sort of man one might have expected to find in a mounted regiment at all, in spite of the loose, patriarchal system that prevailed in the country cavalry regiments.

He started off in a loudly jocular spirit, which seemed to John Oliver, as he rode quietly near him—they were the last men out—to be rather forced. But as they rode further into the unknown country stretching vast and sandy and open before them, Pitt became very quiet. . . . He had been using his field glasses continually. Suddenly he stopped. "I say——" he began, and without another word, he turned his horse's head and rode furiously back. He put spurs to the horse, and the animal, catching the spirit of his rider, reared up and pitched him sharply over his head. Where he had fallen young Pitt lay, and the horse made off.

It was at precisely the same moment that a senior officer passed his field-glasses to the man next to him.

"Can you see anything?" he said. "What do

you think of that cloud of dust straight ahead? Or isn't it a cloud of dust?"

"It's that right enough, sir," said the man to whom he had given the glasses.

"I expect they've spotted us too," said the officer, and gave the order to return.

It coincided with young Pitt's individual decision to the same effect. So that of all the men in the small party only John Oliver, who had been next to him a small distance behind the rest, had known that young Pitt's horse had galloped off on the initiative of his rider and not of his rider's senior officer. And it was John Oliver who lifted the now unconscious boy on to his own saddle, and struggled back with him, pursued by desultory bullets, after the others to camp.

That evening, Pitt, more pasty-faced than ever, approached John Oliver as he sat smoking outside his tent. But there was resolution in the pale blue eyes.

"You know why I made off," he said directly.

"Well, that's all over," said John Oliver.

"It's not all over," said Pitt. "It was funk, and I deserved to be left where the horse left me."

"You'll get over that feeling. It will be all right next time."

"But you despise me."

"I have no business to despise anybody."

"That's because you're—fine. And you brought me away on your own horse."

On John Oliver's high cheek-bones there came a flush.

"Now you shut up," he said kindly.

"If you want me to," said Pitt. "But I swear I won't forget. And thank God you saw me and no one else. I know it ends there." His pale eyes filled with tears. "I don't feel a coward, but when it comes to the point, I am one. I don't know what to do about it. I would sooner die than this should happen again."

§ 4

And there, but for some official commendation. the matter apparently ended. But about a month later, shortly before John Oliver himself left for Cape Town with a wound in his leg, young Pitt spoke about it again.

"I wrote to my father and told him everything," he said. "I've just had a letter from him. He'll be in Cape Town over Christmas. He wants me to tell you that if there's anything in the world he can do to show how much he appreciates——"

"My dear boy," John Oliver interrupted him "to please me, don't say any more."

Nevertheless it was with the pleasurable feeling of one about to be greatly thanked that John Oliver met Pitt's father in Cape Town when he went there with his wound.

He was surprised to find Mr. Pitt an impressive and robust man. He had inferred from the appearance of the son that the father would be equally unprepossessing. And when Mr. Pitt spoke the last possibility of any resemblance between them vanished. Mr. Pitt's voice carried

the assurance of a familiarity with dignified situations.

"What can this man be?" John Oliver puzzled, and before he left was not only enlightened but overwhelmed.

He had refused a whiskey and soda, and so it was over tea that Mr. Pitt smiled and said to him in his heavy but pleasant voice: "You know, Mr. Oliver, I find I'm generally able to make a pretty accurate guess as to a man's occupation after speaking to him for ten minutes. We all have our little vanities, and this is one of mine. Khaki makes a difference, of course. But you elude me altogether. Is it farming?"

"No," said John Oliver, and hesitated over the elder man's frank curiosity. Mr. Pitt was so obviously and purposefully—so very amiably—anxious to know in what relation of business-life they stood together.

"No?" echoed Mr. Pitt and waited, while John Oliver flushed and paled and was finally impelled to speak.

"I was a digger."

"Really? A river digger? Now why couldn't I have guessed that?" Mr. Pitt seemed extraordinarily pleased.

"Yes."

"And do you think of returning to the digging when you go back to civilian life?"

"No." John Oliver had no idea how much vehemence the monosyllable carried.

"Ah! quite so."

And then somehow the talk drifted on to other topics. But as John Oliver rose to go Mr. Pitt said suddenly:

"Of course, you understand diamonds well."

"I suppose I do."

"You haven't ever thought of buying?" Mr. Pitt asked as if one had but to think to achieve.

"Never had the money."

"But for a syndicate?"

"It never entered my mind. Such a thing was outside my life altogether."

"But would you have liked to?" pursued Mr. Pitt.

"It would have been better than digging." John Oliver admitted with some bitterness.

"Well, would you care to buy for my syndicate?" said Mr. Pitt.

"Your syndicate?"

"The Eureka."

"Are you Charles Christopher Pitt?" demanded John Oliver.

"Why not?" smiled the owner of the name. "Think it over, won't you? I'll find the guarantees, of course."

He interrupted John Oliver's thanks as John Oliver had interrupted his son's thanks. "I owe you a good deal more than that."

There was a look on his face which, as John Oliver interpreted it, seemed to him one of the miracles of Nature. Apparently Charles Christopher Pitt exulted in the possession of that pasty-faced youth!

§ 5

As both Mr. Pitt and John Oliver had known, the thinking-over process was a formula. John Oliver could never hope to do better than buy for the Eureka syndicate. Yet he made a stipulation: "I should prefer," he said, "to buy only on the Upper River."

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Pitt. "As you wish. Is that where you were digging yourself?"

"No." said John Oliver.

"No?"

"No."

"But you would find a ready-made clientèle where you were digging yourself, wouldn't you? However," he added quickly, as he noticed the expression on John Oliver's face, "it is entirely as you like. I leave the locality to you. . . ."

Afterwards John Oliver cursed his lack of *savoir-faire* He should not have let Mr. Pitt see so surely that there were reasons why he preferred not to buy along the Lower River. What if he made enquiries?

John Oliver asked himself that question often enough. But if Mr. Pitt made enquiries he never communicated the result to John Oliver or anyone else, and so John Oliver finally forced himself to the conclusion that if nothing was said, either nothing was known or nothing was cared.

CHAPTER XVI

§ 1

Hester Grant woke up one morning with the subconscious idea that the day was not altogether pleasant. And yet apparently there was nothing wrong with the day itself. Here they were, her father, her two sisters and herself, at Muizenberg, that wonderful suburb of Cape Town which she had often heard spoken of as the most perfect bathing-resort in the world; the day promised gloriously blue and calm; the sea was sending its invitation to her very nostrils; her conscience was clear, her body was sound—and yet here was this vague unhappiness heavy on her spirit. She tried to materialize it. Suddenly she had it. This day was her birthday and it made her twenty-eight.

Like many people, Hester had a childish conception of a birthday. The single day, because it initiated a new numeral, seemed to her to compass a year. But yesterday she was twenty-seven and felt and thought herself twenty-seven, and here to-day she was twenty-eight, and twenty-seven seemed to her very far away, and young—very young—compared with twenty-eight. . . .

She began to think of the distance between twenty-eight and thirty. The days were passing and soon she would be thirty. And then she would

be forty and fifty and sixty. She would be old. . . .

Hester Grant hated old age and feared death. As a child she had wept to think of the shortness of life. Religion had never comforted her, nor had the thought of an after-life ever frightened or consoled her. It was the sheer physical fact that tormented her—the ceasing to be. One moment she would be a living thing, seeing, hearing, feeling, talking, moving, and the next moment she would be—nothing. Wonderful things would be happening in the world and she would not know of them. With the course of invention life would become quite an extraordinary and different thing —and she would not experience it, she would be among the old, old dead of the world's history. And perhaps one day there would be discoveries made that would enable people to live for hundreds of years, mechanical hearts and organs,— Heaven knows what, anything was possible!— and she would have missed it all. She would be merely a little heap of bones in an old underground coffin.

Sometimes, as a small girl, in the dead of night, she would slip over to Alma's bed across the room and would whisper to her, "Alma! Alma!"

"Yes?" very sleepily.

"Alma, are you afraid to die?"

"Oh, Hester! don't be silly. Go to bed!"

"Alma, I'm afraid to die."

"But you're not dying. There's nothing the matter with you."

"One day. When I am old."

"That's a long way off."

"Not so long. Only sixty years perhaps! And then I'll be dead for millions of years."

"Oh, Hester! Let me sleep!"

Hester would creep back into bed, and lie with eyes wide open, thinking about the horror of death.

Nowadays not death itself as the fading of youth, the passing of life, tormented her.

Here she was twenty-eight. The spring of life was gone, would never return. And it was absurd to say that women to-day were younger than they had ever been. They might think themselves younger, bear themselves more youthfully, deceive themselves and deceive the world, but Nature was a strict accountant who made no mistakes. She could add up the years to-day as well as ever in the past. A woman of twenty-eight was still a woman of twenty-eight, and that was the end of it. Why, in proof of it, a decade ago she had considered herself a mature person. And yet to-day eighteen seemed to her inexpressibly young—a childish age. That was because she was now no longer quite young herself. For, after all, a girl of eighteen was, in all practical fact, a woman. She might love and be loved of mature men, might marry, might bear children, might govern a house. And she, Hester, was twenty-eight, and none of these things had come to her; or ever would, as far as she could see. A blackness fell on her heart. She was living, and

yet life was passing her by. There was in Hester not so much a sentimental love of love as a jealous horror of being left out; a bitter pride that recoiled from imagined discussions of why the Grant girls did not marry; a very sure knowledge that not pity as much as a self-satisfied contempt on the part of more fortunate women was the lot meted out to the unchosen. . . . probably the very women she most despised most despised her. . . .

She often wondered at Alma. Either Alma was very deep or very shallow, had nothing to conceal or was very reserved. Even Hester could not tell. Perhaps, she sometimes thought, that strange little affair with René van Reede was at the root of Alma's attitude towards matrimony. But she had never cared to ask her. For years his name had not been mentioned among them.

Alma was now over twenty-nine, but she seemed neither to realise nor resent the fact. In no way did she give the impression that there was less time before her now than there had been when she was nineteen. Everyone still spoke of her as a delightful girl. It had hardly begun to enter anyone's mind to phrase it "a delightful woman." Neither by act or speech did she suggest the apprehensive spinster. Her figure was as slight and girlish as ever and if the contours of her face were perhaps more sharply defined than they had been a few years ago, one put it down to the fact that she was rather thin generally. Only in the actual presence of a younger woman did the fact

spring forward that Alma Grant was, after all, not so young any more. But she was now very frequently in the company of a younger woman. Unobtrusively Ruth had slipped into womanhood. And not merely into womanhood, but into a womanhood so resembling Alma's own that it enforced the more strongly the distinction of the years that lay between the two sisters. And yet no one spoke of Ruth as "delightful". A nice girl, a pleasant girl, a pretty girl, she might be called, but in the Grant family Alma had the monopoly of "delightfulness".

And if, perhaps, during the last year or two, Alma's train of young men, and quite young men, had begun rather to dwindle, even now there was not so much a definite lack of admiration, as the substitution of another kind of admiration. So that one hardly noticed that there was any falling-off in attraction. It was only when one realised that most of her contemporaries—men and women—had achieved the complacency of matrimony; that such and such a young man who had paid court to her—was it actually seven years ago!—was now the father of two children; that her female companions were of late mostly girls many years younger than herself; and that her male companions too were either much younger or much older, that one suddenly thought: "Alma Grant had better be careful. She is no longer quite as young as she was."

Sometimes Hester spoke to her about it—not perhaps without a little envy. "Why don't you

marry So-and-so? You won't do better by waiting. We are getting on, you know, Alma." But Alma would laugh with a light sureness of herself that almost irritated Hester.

"Twenty-nine isn't a hundred."

"It's not too far off for an unmarried woman!"

"You wouldn't marry someone you didn't quite care for, Hester."

"How do you know I wouldn't?"

"Why should you?"

"Oh, don't be so sweet and simple. You know very well that most women love a man simply because he wants to marry them. They dare not love before they are chosen. They'd be left every time. My dear Alma, I'm prepared to love any man who has the sense to want to marry me."

Alma never quite understood the deadly seriousness of her sister's words, for the simple reason that she could never place herself in the position of an unwanted woman. She used to laugh her pleasant little laugh. "I'll tell your husband one day."

"You won't have the opportunity. I'll never have one."

§ 2

But if Hester sometimes opened the door of her thoughts to Alma, to the rest of her world she was a blank wall. Her friends dismissed her as "not that sort. She isn't interested in men. She's a born old maid." And Hester was proud enough to allow them to remain in the belief that

she abhorred one half of human creation simply because it was male!

She got out of bed and stood before her looking-glass. Her hair was down in two sleep-towzled plaits, and her face was flushed. She wondered if she looked twenty-eight with her hair down. "But girls don't look twenty-eight nowadays," she reflected. "There simply is no such age as twenty-eight any more."

Nevertheless, she did look fully twenty-eight. Her face was a little hard for first youth, her features were rather big, her complexion was too dark. But her grey eyes were magnificently honest and intolerant in their deep, black-browed setting. Her hair was a rich and thick dark brown. It was the only possession on which she dared admit pride. She was thin, but her frame was excellent. Yet neither man nor woman found any beauty in Hester. She was outdone by the obvious prettiness of her sisters. A connoisseur might have found a dominant attraction in her mutinous grey eyes, but Hester did not live among connoisseurs.

She dressed, and went down to meet her father and sisters at breakfast. For the last few years the Grants had spent the month of January at the Union Hotel. It was quite an expensive hotel, but then all the hotels of Muizenberg were expensive, and as they were an economical family, their income was adequate to the annual dissipation of a holiday in a good hotel.

They sat at the little table which they occupied

every year, and bowed a morning greeting to the various small groups at other tables. They probably knew about half the visitors at the hotel from previous years, but they knew very few at nearer than bowing distance. Every year people came down in parties, and clung so strongly to one another that the parties seldom suffered any enlargement. With the units of these parties the Grants sometimes came into contact over the small courtesies of hotel life, in the public bathing-boxes, on the beach, perhaps in the water. On these occasions casual, indifferent little smiles were interchanged. But the parties as a whole remained isolated. Even the young men of the various groups adhered with great loyalty to their own small sections.

But, of course, there were always independent young men at the hotel who had come down unencumbered by social obligations, and some of these sooner or later managed to become acquainted with Alma or Ruth and so attached themselves to the Grants as a party. But during the last two seasons their number had decreased, and although now and then an occasional escort of suitable age presented himself, the young men were now rather over young for the society of the two elder girls, and were generally the monopoly of Ruth. . . .

Across the tall blue mountain flowers on the table Mr. Grant read items of war news to his daughters. He was an ardent see-it-through man, and never failed in optimism for the simple reason that his mind had never conceived such a possibility as

failure on the part of England. He spent his time between making prophecies of future movements and explaining afterwards how, but for this or that, his prophecies would have come true. Since he had no imagination at all, he never formed any conception of a battle-field as a place of human suffering. "We are inexhaustible," he would say, "we can put in million after million, and we'll do it, too, by Gad, to the last man." . . . "To the last man" was one of his favourite expressions. It conveyed nothing to his mind. He could not himself bear physical pain, but he was strong in the contemplation of the battling of millions. He never thought of them in terms of blood.

It was generally to Hester that he addressed his war-remarks. His other two daughters were not so interested. All over the world, throughout the war, there lived European men and women who did not find the war the most superlatively interesting topic. Quite estimable men and women with kind hearts and respectable characters, whom the war and its ubiquitousness had not overwhelmed.

But Hester had a stronger imagination than her sisters. Her nights were filled with the thought of blood and mutilation. Sometimes she felt as if she were standing, godlike, on a high mountain looking down on thousands and tens of thousands of small humans rushing to kill one another. Once she had said to her father: "Father, I don't want anyone to die for my

liberty. My liberty isn't worth it. Nor is anyone else's. Liberty can be too dearly bought." Whereupon her father had spoken at such heated length that she had determined never to let human passion thrill her into open speech again. So now she merely discussed the news with him as impersonally as she could.

§ 3

At ten o'clock Hester took her bathing-suit and towels off the verandah-rail outside her room, put them into a small basket, and accompanied her father to the beach. There, before bathing, she sat next to him on the sands under a big green-lined sunshade, glancing now and then at a magazine, but for the most part watching the promenading couples as they passed and re-passed her. As far as she could see the beach stretched away white and smooth and unbroken. But for all human use to which it was put it might have been confined to the few hundred yards immediately in front of the pavilion. Most of the promenaders and beach-dwellers were Jews—generally from Johannesburg or Kimberley, exceptionally well-dressed and good-looking young women accompanied by rather unprepossessing young men; particularly stout and unattractive middle-aged women accompanied by very pretty children. The Jews were to Hester an extraordinary race. Apparently there was no middle way with them. Either they were shamefully dejected or shamelessly opulent. Had they no transition period?

Here in Muizenberg timid old women transplanted from Russian Ghettos shuffled bewilderedly and hopelessly in the race of civilisation behind their nimble, world-defying offspring. They knew no language but their own jargon and could never accustom themselves to freedom and wealth; but their sons would be professional men—no less; and their daughters would marry either wealth or culture.

Of late years they were monopolizing Muizenberg to such an extent that the non-Jewish northern population were beginning either to go there at a different season, or else to content themselves with resorts less attractive. And as the sands grew more and more cheerfully Hebraic, the class of Jews which was Hebrew-escaping was forced to the same expedients as the non-Jews.

Nevertheless, the Muizenberg population, if predominatingly Jewish, still carried a sprinkling of other folks; and the Grants, at any rate, preferred to stay there during the gayest and brightest time of the year, Jews or no Jews.

Alma and Ruth were walking briskly along the beach in company with two young, khaki-clad men. Hester told herself gloomily that a woman of twenty-nine was lowering her dignity to go about constantly with youths of twenty-one or twenty-two. And yet, she reflected, it was still more absurd to spend a holiday solitarily.

They passed her and waved a cheerful greeting. She waved rather stiffly back; and, feeling the

stiffness herself, thought, "That is why I am unpopular."

A group of young people who had been at the Union Hotel during the last three seasons followed almost at the heels of her sisters. They were talking animatedly, and as they passed her greeted her pleasantly but distantly. A little further along, however, they stopped. Hester was ostensibly reading her magazine, but she knew that they were looking at her. Then one of the girls —a smart pretty girl whom they called Mab Grierson, came briskly towards her. "How are you, Mr. Grant? Lovely day, isn't it, Miss Grant? I say, be a dear."

Hester, wondering, smiled vaguely.

"We've heard you play. You do play so beautifully. Won't you play for us to-night?"

Hester, who seldom received her due as a musician, was flushed and flattered.

"You will, won't you?" begged Miss Grierson.

Hester agreed.

Afterwards she wondered if she had done well to respond so promptly to the first overtures after such a long period of casual acquaintanceship.

"Well, I've promised now!" she clinched the matter.

§ 4

That evening Hester put on her favourite dress. It was an arrangement of soft grey and rose-colour that suited her better than any of her other

clothes. As a rule, she dressed badly—she had no gift for clothes. But, in the case of this dress, Ruth, who dominated the family in the matter of taste, had exerted herself altruistically, and the result was, as she put it, that "once in a while, anyhow, Hester looks decent."

And Hester was one of that large body of women who look their best at night. Her skin gained under artificial light the brilliance it lacked by day. Her cheeks were slightly flushed with apprehension. She had not been practising lately, and was doubtful of her ability to play publicly at such short notice from memory. But, having promised, she was prepared to go through with the agreement.

She presumed there was to be a small musical affair and wondered who the other performers were. At dinner she said to her sisters with an indicating nod, "Those people want me to play to them."

"Oh, good!" said Ruth. "It's time they began to notice how well you play. In the lounge, I suppose. We can come and listen, can't we? They wouldn't have a private affair there, would they?"

After dinner Mr. Grant and the three girls went into the lounge and sat down on a settee at the end of the room. There were several small groups of hotel-folk there—it was a very large room—drinking coffee and smoking. Miss Grierson and her friends were standing together near the piano. Presently a few of the young men began to move

back the furniture immediately around the piano. Hester noticed some strangers in the party—a stout, middle-aged man and a slighter man in khaki were standing together talking to Miss Grierson. They had their backs to Hester and she found herself unable to place them. . . .

After a while Miss Grierson came towards the Grants. She was looking very pretty and smiled charmingly at them. "Oh, there you are! Will you come now, Miss Grant? We do think it so sweet of you."

Hester accompanied her to the piano. For a moment Miss Grierson left her while she ran back to speak to one of the young men. Hester felt awkward standing there alone and unintroduced, but looked at the keys of the piano as unconcernedly as possible. Then Miss Grierson returned. "Do you know these, Miss Grant?" she said, pointing to the music on the rest.

"I don't want music," replied Hester. "I play from memory."

"Oh, do you? How lovely! The very latest ones?"

"I play classical music as a rule."

"Classical?" echoed Miss Grierson, puzzled.

Hester's eyes fell on the music at the piano. "This seems to be dance-music," she said, her voice suddenly dry.

"Of course, it is dance-music! I've promised to teach these people the latest steps, and we thought you would play them for us. You said you would, you know."

She looked compellingly at Hester. Hester's flush deepened and then faded altogether. So this was the sort of music they wanted of her! What a fool, what a fool she had been! She tried to look as if she had known all along.

"I don't understand this kind of music," she said at length.

"Oh, but it's quite simple!" said Miss Grierson. "Look, it goes like this." She strummed a few bars.

"Will you play this one first, and then number three? You *are* a dear!"

She left Hester at the piano and dashed back to her friends. For a moment Hester's fingers and eyes refused their office. Then, annoyed at her own weakness, she found herself pounding out the tinselly music.

§ 5

She felt that she had been playing for hours, but it was only half-an-hour. The dancers, under Miss Grierson's tuition, were still bobbing and shuffling. In Hester's mind were revolving ironic speeches, dignified methods of escape. She wondered what her father and sisters thought of her ridiculous situation. She looked away from the music to where she had left them sitting, but they were no longer there. As she turned her head the man in khaki rose from his chair. Presently she heard him approaching her. He seemed to be walking with a limp. He stood silently behind her—she felt but could not see his presence

—while she finished the dance she was playing. Then she found him visibly fronting her.

"Excuse me," he said, "I think we have—I hope I'm not making a mistake—aren't you Hester Grant?"

"Why," she exclaimed, "you're the young man we met the last time we rode over Lost Hope. Did you get the snapshot after all?" John Oliver remembered very distinctly getting the snapshot. He had it now, torn across, but repaired with stamps on the back, in his pocketbook. It was almost the only thing he had taken away with him from Lost Hope. He had always felt vaguely but insistently that it stood for something he had forever lost by his subsequent mode of life.

"Yes," he said so shortly that Hester felt an immediate chill. The old-time glow into which his sudden presence had surprised her departed as quickly as it had come.

"It's a long time ago," she said in a quieter voice. "And we only met once. I wonder you remember me."

"I have not so many pleasant things to remember in my life," he answered. And Hester looking at him, saw that youth had long since escaped him.

"Miss Grant," called Miss Grierson at that moment.

John Oliver took a sudden resolution. "Look here," he said, "you don't want to play for these people any more, do you?"

Hester flushed. "It's absurd stuff."

"Well, then, tell them so. I've been wanting to speak to you again for twelve years."

No man had ever said anything of the kind to Hester before. Exhilaration mounted in her.

"Don't say it in plain figures," she commanded in the clear peremptory voice that John Oliver still remembered. "It makes me too old. No, I won't play for them any more."

She rose and walked deliberately across to Miss Grierson and told her so. Something in the tone of her voice froze Miss Grierson's protests.

John Oliver joined them. "Will you excuse me, Miss Grierson? I hear that my old friend, Mr. Grant, is at the hotel, and I want to see him particularly. I'll just tell Mr. Pitt. He's motoring me back to town later on."

They were aware of the eyes that followed them as they left the room together.

Outside Hester smiled at him.

"But you never knew father, did you?"

"No," said John Oliver reflectively. "No, now that you come to mention it, I don't think I did."

CHAPTER XVII

§ 1

The next day John Oliver was at Muizenberg again. He had not told Hester that he intended to come, but she had known, without doubt, that he would. He found her sitting at her accustomed place with her father. He raised his hat with a smile and sat down beside them on the sands.

Mr. Grant asked him a question about Lost Hope. He answered shortly and apparently without interest, and turned the talk on to the War. He was deliberately excluding Lost Hope from his thoughts. He intended—as he had told McInerney—to drop twelve years out of his life. Lost Hope did not exist—his years at Lost Hope did not exist.

As he sat there on the sands half leaning on his elbow, Hester unobtrusively studied him. In the glaring morning light he looked older than he had done the evening before. He had deep lines running down each side of his face. His nostrils were too sharp. His mouth, and the setting of his eyes too heavy. The cheeks were full near the mouth, hollow under the rather high-cheeked bones. He was decidedly different from the man as she remembered him standing on his débris heap, his face eager and sun-flushed, his shirt open

about his vigorous young neck, breasting the world with the hope of youth.

But after all, twelve years were twelve years, and her estimate of him may have grown during that time. Even now he was not unattractive in his becoming khaki. The man who grows thin on dissipation always presents a more forgivable front to the world than the man who grows coarse on dissipation.

But Hester did not think of dissipation in connection with John Oliver. She told herself vaguely that the untended life of a digger was bound to leave its mark on a man, and that, in any case, thirty-five was not twenty-two or twenty-three. Nor, she added to herself, was sixteen twenty-eight. Surely he must find her much changed too. She glanced at his neck. Of all things in a man a handsome neck gallantly carried appealed most to Hester. She had always remembered John Oliver's neck as she had seen it that morning, brown and strong, free and open to the early breeze. It was different now. What she saw of it above his khaki collar was rather thin and loose-skinned . . . He saw her looking at him and smiled. He had good teeth and was very pleasant when he smiled.

"Well," he said, "and so you find me much changed?"

"I was making mental comparisons," Hester admitted.

"Don't. But still, do you find me very different?"

"One is bound to change," said Hester. "But we can decide the matter definitely if, as you say, you have kept that old snapshot I took of you. Where is it?"

"I have it on me."

"Here? Now?" Hester felt the colour rising to her face.

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

"It is very dilapidated."

"It's bound to be after such a long time. Won't you show it to me?"

John Oliver took out his pocket-book and silently handed the picture to her.

"Why, it's torn right across!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it's torn right across," he said.

"How did that happen?"

"I did it."

"And it's mended with stamps."

"Yes."

Hester wanted to ask other questions, but something in his curt answers prevented her.

"The picture is quite clear all the same, isn't it?" she said as she looked at it.

"I've changed a lot?" he repeated.

She glanced from him to the snapshot and back again. Hester had never been a diplomatist.

"Digging is a hard life," she said finally.

He put the picture back into his pocket-book and stood up.

"Would you care to come for a walk along the sands if you don't mind my limp?"

"I'd like to," she agreed. "Father, will you be here when we return?"

§ 2

"And so you do find me much changed?" he asked once more as they walked along.

Hester wondered at the persistency of his question.

"We all change," she said.

John Oliver watched the holes his heavy stick made in the deep wet sands as they walked along.

"I am beginning life over again," he remarked suddenly. "Am I too old to begin again?"

"I don't think so," answered Hester.

"I've wasted my years," he said. "Do the wasted years count in a man's life?"

"I can't tell. And the wasted years in a woman's life?" The comparison almost amused him.

"That's different," he said.

They walked on a little while in silence. Hester was happy in the thought that he was confiding in her. She exulted in the feeling that she was no longer "out of it," that here was a man to whom her womanhood counted. She passed Miss Grierson chatting gaily with a youthful naval officer. They seemed very young and happy. A little pain shot through her. That, at any rate, she had missed forever—the careless gaiety of youth—no matter what the present might hold or the future might bring.

Nevertheless, it was with a feeling of satisfac-

tion that she nonchalantly greeted Miss Grierson. She too was walking with a man who found her not unattractive. Presently John Oliver spoke again:

"I don't understand women," he said. "How do they feel about a man's past?"

Hester reflected. Then she answered queerly:

"I don't understand women either. They don't feel about a man's past."

"And you?"

"I don't know about myself. I have never considered a man's past."

"But in general?"

Hester thought of the ideals of early youth vanishing one by one. Her illusions and pretty little dreams were behind her.

"In general, I suppose women prefer not to think at all. It is so much simpler in all the ways of life."

"But not a woman like you," John Oliver said gravely. "You are different."

"Am I?"

"Aren't you?"

"We are all alike at bottom," said Hester. "Only in some cases the bottom is nearer the top than in others."

§ 3

Both John Oliver and Hester knew that things were marching with them towards a definite end. They had known it simultaneously and immediately. To what end precisely was not so

clear. But to Hester it seemed clearer than to John Oliver. She was reliant on his purpose where he was merely reliant on his feelings. But then he knew the facts about himself, and she did not.

She met him nowadays with a little serene smile of intimacy which implied a good deal more than she realised. It implied for instance, security. It implied, in fact, ownership. It was the kind of little smile which women keep for the time when the first uncertainties and dangers, the consequent coquetries and pourparlers shall have passed away.

But neither she nor John Oliver analysed the smile. It merely existed as a bond between them as sure as a clasp of the hands.

They spoke about many things together, discussed thoughts, hopes, views—rather vaguely and impersonally—but they seldom got to facts. The facts of his life, the facts of her life. He certainly did not intend her ever to know that he had lived for a decade a drunken life with a coloured woman. But, for that very reason, the thought of it never, for a moment, escaped him. She, on the other hand, could say little where there was little to say. What should she tell him? That she lived and had always lived an empty, aimless life? That, until his advent, she had spent her days drearily anticipating the dreariness of future days—the loneliness of an uncompanioned old age? It was not, she had often told herself, as if either of her sisters was likely to remain

unmarried and bound by a common fate to her. On the contrary, they would marry and she would stay with them, if for a short time, as an honoured guest; if for a long time as a guest on sufferance. Her pride revolted from the idea. Revolted too from the thought of the contemptuous pity that even in these times is meted out to the woman who is mateless. . . .

So of personal things they spoke little. And yet they felt that they knew one another well—well enough, as Hester put it herself.

§ 4

John Oliver had taken fright. What was he doing? What, moreover, did he intend to do?

It had all come about so simply. He had met at last the girl who, for all their brief, solitary meeting, had stood to him, during all the black days on the Diggings, for something bright and unattainable. Now he had met her, and she had been approachable and friendly. He had been overwhelmed by his unlooked for good fortune. He had met her again. And very often again. And she had been not only approachable and friendly, but a little more than approachable and a little more than friendly. In any other position than his, he might—with his new prospects founded on his connection with the Eureka syndicate—have gone to her and have asked her to marry him. But had a man like he the right to offer marriage to anyone for whom he had not only love but a deep regard and admiration?

Annie! He had squandered the best years of his life on a drunken, coloured woman that was little removed, judging by any mental or moral standard, from a beast, and the poor disillusioned, ashamed, bespattered remainder was now all he had to offer to the woman he loved.

Was it good enough? If she knew would she consider it good enough? He was perfectly sure she would not. And not only would she not consider it good enough, but he would certainly think less of her if she did.

But if he did not tell her how would she know? And if she did not know then, after all, it was as if it had not been. To no other person did it make much difference—not even to Annie and her offspring, and, in any case, he did not propose to consider them. And yet if somehow she discovered it? What would happen then? He had not the resolution to face such an eventuality. . . .

He turned to another aspect. What if she had now arrived at the stage of expecting some declaration on his part? Would she not think ill of him if he suddenly escaped from her life without an explanation? And obviously an explanation he could not give. . . .

Again. Was he, in himself, except from circumstances, worse than any other man? Given the lonely, empty digger-life and no counter-influence, was it not almost too much to expect of an ordinary human being that he should run the straight course with the endurance of a moral giant? He had fallen certainly. But his soul

had not descended. He had never committed the sin of self-complacency. He had always risen on wings of contempt above his surroundings. And many men did not even do that. He had stumbled into a slough and lain there, but he had not deliberately sought slough after slough. In intention and soul he was probably superior to many of the men whom the world accepted readily. And he had been strong enough to put his old life behind him. Did that not count?

And, if one thought of it fairly, where was the essential difference between himself and quite enough other men? Except that Annie was black. . . . Did that make the essential difference? . . .

But ten years of it. And four woolly-haired bastards.

Had such a man as he the right to happiness?

Yet he wanted happiness as much as any other man.

Should life tempt him and he be too cowardly to grasp?

§ 5

For over a week John Oliver did not come to Muizenberg, and Hester began to upbraid herself for her dependence on his presence, for her too obvious showing of it. Ruth asked her casually how it was Mr. Oliver had not been over recently, wondered whether something had not happened to his foot again, and was surprised that, in any case, he had not let them know. Hester thought the

things Ruth said, but was too proud to express them. She pretended an indifference which deceived nobody.

When finally she was told one afternoon that a gentleman had called to see her and was waiting in the drawing-room—a gentleman in khaki—she delayed long and entered coldly, but there was warmth in her heart.

John Oliver, anything but at his ease, sat talking jerkily.

She offered him tea.

He said: "I want to say something rather difficult to you. They'll all be coming in to tea here presently, I suppose. Won't you come to the sands with me?"

For some time they walked silently along the beach. As they left the crowding pavilion behind them John Oliver suddenly remarked: "Well, you know how I feel about it, Hester. I want to ask you to marry me, but I'm a poor man, and my life isn't the sort of life I should have liked to offer you."

Hester found herself in a difficulty about replying. They were now standing still facing one another.

"Say something," begged John Oliver at last.

"I don't quite understand," said Hester. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Yes—I don't know—Hester, would you have me as I am in the present—with just a hope for the future? I have nothing to offer you—except myself, and I am not worth much, I tell you

frankly. I warn you I am not good enough. I can't say any more. Will you have me?"

John Oliver looked at Hester and told himself that, after all, he was playing the game. He was warning her. She would never be able afterwards to reproach him with concealing anything.

On the other hand, he found himself hoping that she would not examine too closely his insinuations. He wished, in fact, to satisfy his conscience without having subsequently to pay for the satisfaction.

Hester wondered if all women found themselves at the turning point of their lives as she found herself. She looked at John Oliver. He was palpably nervous and afraid, a little haggard. . . . And so this man was going to be her husband! All at once she found herself clinging to her spinsterhood. She did not want to marry—either John Oliver or anyone else. There was too much ahead. With the old life—dependent only on herself for happiness or unhappiness, she knew where she was. But this other life—a life shared with a man—a stranger. She felt queerly—yes, this was a stranger before her!

"Will you?" repeated John Oliver.

And for all the thoughts that were tumbling about her brain Hester heard herself saying "Yes."

The blood left John Oliver's face. He looked more haggard now than a moment ago in his uncertainty.

"You understand," he said in a dry, painful

voice, "that I am just as I am—and a poor man—and not the man you should marry?"

A warm flood of pity broke on Hester. She saw him speaking out of the humility of his feeling for her. She put her hand over his and found that it was trembling. He closed his hand over hers with a sudden, hard clasp.

CHAPTER XVIII

§ 1

So Hester was going to be married. She could not realise it; but her father and sisters, to her amazement, accepted the situation complacently enough.

"You don't seem surprised," she said to Alma.

"Why should I be?" answered Alma. "Everyone gets married."

"But didn't I seem to you the most unlikely person in the world to marry?"

"Why, you goose," smiled Alma, "you are no different from anyone else. You are young, you are healthy, you are good-looking——"

"Not good-looking surely, Alma!"

"Certainly, when you want to be. No woman can be good-looking if she doesn't want to."

"But somehow I believed that no one would ever think of marrying me. You know, no one except John ever has. I can't be really attractive."

"Good Lord, Hester, you speak as if you were a—oh, a deformed old caricature of about sixty. All women are attractive."

"Why don't you decide to marry yourself, Alma?"

Alma shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I suppose I shall one day. There's time enough."

"Don't wait too long, old girl."

"Yes, perhaps I ought to be settling down," mused Alma. "Are you very happy, Hester?"

"I think I am," Hester answered reflectively.

"Aren't you sure?"

"It's—different you know."

Mr. Grant felt himself crowned with a new dignity in the possession of a prospective son-in-law.

John Oliver had approached him nervously, in awe of him as the father of the woman he loved.

"I take it you will be able to support a wife," Mr. Grant had remarked.

John Oliver had explained his circumstances —he had pondered the question, and had his answer prepared.

"I have nothing in the world, Mr. Grant. But Charles Christopher Pitt of the Eureka Syndicate has promised to back me in buying for his company. I think that gives me immediate prospects. I am to get a salary and a percentage. Mr. Pitt feels he is under some obligation to me, and is making the business a personal matter. I ought to know within the next few months exactly how I stand. I am beginning at once. This leg of mine finishes me for the army at present. I should not expect Hester to marry me until I can adequately provide for her."

"Quite so. Quite so," nodded Mr. Grant. "And you are, of course, reasonably sure that you

will soon be able to do so. An uncertain engagement is a thing I strongly disapprove of."

John Oliver looked his admiration of the little grey man who had never in his life provided for himself, not to mention his wife and children.

The meeting ended in an amicable mutual understanding.

"And," Mr. Grant said, "you will find, Oliver, that Hester won't come to you altogether empty-handed."

In short, everything was as satisfactory as it could be.

§ 2

Not many months later they were married very quietly. In a small, nearly empty church, Hester stood beside John Oliver in a white coat and skirt wondering how it was that this—the most important moment in her life—seemed to her so very little different from any other moment. She wished sternly to feel some strong emotion, some sense of the deep import of the ceremony, perhaps a kind of spiritual awe. She found herself, instead, calmly examining John Oliver as he stared straight before him, tense and plainly moved. She noticed his profile, the little wrinkles on his neck, the heavy line from nostril to mouth. She told herself insistently that this was her husband. The fact conveyed nothing to her. Her eyes wandered around the empty church, noticed the shabby seats, came back to her sisters and her father and the clergyman, and passed from them

again to her husband. She forced the word to smite her brain.

He put the ring on her finger. Hester wondered vaguely at what precise stage of the ceremony the deed was completed. What if they did not sign? Was it a binding contract then?

It gripped her suddenly that now—now—she was irrevocably bound. The thought of irrevocably frightened her. She felt a yearning for the spinsterhood which she had this moment forever lost. She did not wish to be a wife. The wife of John Oliver.

She did not love John Oliver.

Or perhaps she did.

She could not tell.

§ 3

As they signed the register, she thought to herself. Now! Now!

Well, it was done.

Presently John Oliver was looking at her with eyes that seemed to her to hold a trace of fear.

"Hester, you're taking me as I am—for better or worse——"

She smiled slightly.

"You look pale."

"Do I?"

"Are you happy?"

"I believe so."

"Aren't you sure?"

Hester put her hand on his arm.

"Don't speak of it now. I don't know where

I am." She smiled again. "I'm not used to getting married, you know."

He smiled back at her.

"You dear!" he whispered. "I'll make you happy."

CHAPTER XIX

§ 1

For a time it seemed to the Grants that they had become a very small family. Now that she was gone, they were all compelled to realise that Hester had been the pivot of the family. She had been the man in the house. Mr. Grant, while maintaining very strongly his own opinion, had always unconsciously followed her advice. And Alma and Ruth, although they had formed a mild alliance against something in Hester that was inexplicable to them—different (they could not define it otherwise), when it came to the contingencies of life, had invariably had to place their dependence on her.

For Hester, despite her imperfections, her moods, her ideas, her bitterness, had the thing that people call character. She had a horror of death and of fate, and a morbid pride, but she was fearlessly truthful and fearlessly intolerant. She dared to look at motives and consequences honestly; she had a strong feeling of duty, and spasms of extraordinary generosity. Although they would never have admitted it, her father and sisters feared and respected her. Her departure left them rather limp.

§ 2

Now that Mr. Grant had lost his audience, his interest in war-news was beginning to abate.

Daily he found "nothing in the papers." And when he did find something neither Alma nor Ruth wanted to listen.

Out of habit he still conscientiously read his "*Cape Times*" from first page to last page, advertisements and all. But he was, unfortunately, a quick, skimming reader, and once the paper was finished, he found himself with a long, empty day on his hands.

It was at this stage that an old neighbouring couple called Benson induced him to learn bridge. For many years he had contemptuously refused to do so. An intelligent man, he always maintained, had better outlets for his mental energies than a game of cards. What outlets he himself found precisely, he never specified. But since his contention was obviously right, it had never been opposed by much argument, and he had consequently never learnt to play.

But lately, and strictly under protest, he had allowed himself to be initiated. He played with the Bensons and an old bachelor brother of Mrs. Benson's. Within a short time he was an ardent, persistent, and astonishingly incapable player. He had the strongest possible objection to being told anything. One could, he held, only learn by experience. "No post-mortems, please," he would say when Mr. Benson, his nominal instructor, offered to point out his mistakes at the end of the game.

But when occasionally Mr. Benson passed the boundaries of restraint and tried to explain to

him how a certain hand should have been played otherwise, Mr. Grant sat back in his chair with great dignity and remarked:

"Well, of course, that is the view you take of it. But, you must admit, there are different ways of playing a hand. You play it one way, and I play it another. You think your way is right and I think my way is right."

Often Mr. Benson wondered in despair, whether anyone, deliberately trying to make the smallest number of tricks possible, could outclass Mr. Grant's normal way of playing. Once, in a tense moment, he said so, and for over a week Mr. Grant did not come near their house. But gradually, assisted by casual small-talk about the war, he found himself back at his old place at the end of the long dining-room table as a fourth.

This was not the best thing for Mr. Benson. Mr. Benson had a nervous tendency, and the effort of controlling his temper when he played with Mr. Grant kept him awake at night with visions of card-hands and alternative methods of playing them. But they needed a regular fourth, and hope always suggested that one day Mr. Grant would improve.

"If only," Mr. Benson wailed to Mrs. Benson afterwards, "if only he wouldn't always want to get the play into his own hands and overcall me! If only he didn't think that any trick he takes was worth twice as much as any trick I take."

"Did you notice his finesse with the ace, queen

of hearts in the last game?" remarked Mrs. Benson.

"No, I was dummy. I made an excuse and went out. I gave him a beautiful hand and I couldn't bear to stay and see him mess it up. What did he do?"

"The ace, queen, you know, were on the table. And he simply led the queen away from the ace. I asked him afterwards why he did it, and he said he was finessing it."

"He'll never learn," said Mr. Benson bitterly. "The man's a fool."

"Oh, I don't know. You were nearly as bad once," said Mrs. Benson encouragingly.

§ 3

Mr. Grant was developing into a bridge-enthusiast. He insisted on teaching his daughters the game. To their general surprise the thing seemed to come to Ruth as if by instinct. Although Mr. Grant never relaxed the rôle of instructor, he could not help secretly admiring the smooth and rapid accuracy of her play. And to Ruth's disgust he began to have a predilection for playing double-dummy with her. Throughout the long winter evenings, whenever he was not playing with the Bensons, he insisted upon playing either three-handed or two-handed bridge with his daughters.

Alma neither took nor pretended to take any interest in the game. She learnt good-naturedly

when she was asked to learn, played her hands with the gay boldness of utter incomprehension, and placidly accepted her father's scoldings afterwards.

Now that Mr. Grant was instructor and not student he had different views on how a knowledge of bridge was to be acquired.

"There doesn't seem to be anything in the game," Alma complained to Ruth. "If you have good cards you make tricks. If you haven't, you don't. It's just luck."

"I suppose it does seem like that if you don't understand it," said Ruth with superiority.

§ 4

But, after all, there was enough in bridge coupled with Mr. Grant to lose Alma a substantial suitor.

Mr. Somerset was a wealthy bachelor well on towards the forties who was thinking of settling down. In the meantime, he was "looking round". He had been attracted by Alma's slender charm, thought her the kind of woman who could make a man thoroughly comfortable, and was beginning lately to exhibit intentions.

Mr. Somerset was a crack bridge-player.

One night, when he was visiting the Grants "*en famille*," Mr. Grant asked him tentatively if he played bridge.

"Yes, I play a little," admitted Mr. Somerset, with the modesty of a man who is sure of his ground.

"Well, let's have a game," suggested Mr. Grant.

"But I'm an awful rabbit," expostulated Alma, "you know I only play family bridge."

"You can be my partner," her father suggested magnanimously. "Ruth here will play with Mr. Somerset. We play threepence a hundred, Mr. Somerset, just to make it a little more exciting."

Mr. Somerset, who played ten shillings a hundred as a general thing, said "Quite so."

He was a quiet, courteous man, and, after an hour's play, he had quietly and courteously, with the assistance of Ruth and a little luck, won three thousand points from Mr. Grant.

Mr. Grant was under the impression that he was perfectly cool and steady, but his face was flushed and his voice had a trace of asperity in it.

"The luck seems to be altogether with Ruth and you, Mr. Somerset. Perhaps we had better cut for partners now."

Everyone was willing, and it fell to Ruth and Mr. Grant to be partners this time.

Alma smiled at Mr. Somerset: "I am going to ruin you," she said gayly. And, in a small way, she kept her word. Mr. Grant's spirits revived astonishingly.

"You must come again, Mr. Somerset," he said cordially. "I haven't had such a good game of bridge for a long time."

"Blithering old ass!" Mr. Somerset's soul cried within him.

"Thanks," his voice said. "I should like to very much."

On his way home he meditated on the many different ways in which he might have spent the evening more pleasantly in Alma's company.

§ 5

However, he came again. For a little while they sat talking, and Mr. Somerset was beginning to feel cheerful and at ease. He sat in front of the fire, comfortably dinting the brass fender with his square-toed shoes, and told with great success a few jokes that he himself had long suspected of being *passée*. It came to him pleasantly as he looked at Alma sitting, with her small fire-flushed face, in the easy chair opposite, that a man might do worse than pass his evenings this way.

Suddenly Mr. Grant said: "Well, shall we have a little bridge? The night is young."

"I have rather a headache," Mr. Somerset lied ponderously.

"Bad, is it?" Mr. Grant enquired disappointedly.

"Not very bad."

"You don't think," Mr. Grant suggested with a little more hope in his voice, "that a quiet little game might make you forget about it?"

"It might make it worse," said Alma, not without inspiration.

Mr. Somerset looked approval at her.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Mr. Grant, and took two packs of cards and a marker from the sideboard drawer. "We'll cut, shall we?"

Mr. Somerset cut dolorously, and had Alma

again as a partner. If anything she played worse than the previous time. But Mr. Somerset was too completely bored even to notice it.

Ruth was not satisfying her father either.

"Why," he demanded of her, "didn't you lead a club? You must have known I wanted clubs."

"How should I have known?" answered Ruth. "I couldn't see your cards."

"I discarded clubs."

Ruth, who had been found consistently wanting throughout the rubber, answered with sudden sharpness:

"Well, there's no knowing why you ever discard anything, father."

Mr. Grant became ominously silent. The rubber finished on a note of tension. Mr. Somerset said: "I'm afraid my head is getting rather worse, Mr. Grant. Perhaps I'd better be going. I don't feel very good company to-night. . . ."

Alma never knew of the battle that was waged in Mr. Somerset's soul between his interest in her and his lack of interest in her father. Quite possibly Mr. Somerset was too selfish and too cautious. But of such are the Kingdom of Earth. And of such are generally the wealthy bachelors in the late thirties who are looking for a wife.

Only the result was apparent. Mr. Somerset did not come again.

CHAPTER XX

§ 1

The months passed for Alma in small duties and small gaieties; duties of no consequence, gaities of no interest.

It was summer-time again, and once more the Grants were preparing for their annual excursion to Muizenberg. Alma and Ruth were in their little sewing-room working at seaside clothes. Alma was sitting on the floor cutting out some pink material, surrounded by pins, paper-patterns, shreds and whisps of the stuff she was cutting.

She looked at Ruth, a slight flush on her face.

"Don't you think I'm too old to wear pink, Ruth?"

"It suits you," said Ruth.

"It used to," amended Alma. "But I'm thirty now. And when I was twenty I always had a horror of women who were no longer quite young wearing pink. I always have an idea that pink is a colour that belongs to the very young—it's the youngest colour there is."

"You don't look anywhere near thirty," protested Ruth.

"I do lately," Alma said with quiet finality. "I feel it too. I always used to laugh at Hester for talking like this. I wonder how she's getting on at Kimberley. I'd like to see old Hester

again. One of these days I'll go up there. I wish she would come to Muizenberg for Christmas. It's so hot in Kimberley, I hear. But I suppose she wants to be economical. I don't think John is making a fortune at diamond-buying. Have you any more pins?"

She got up from the ground with her pink material, and slipped the embryonic garment over her head in front of the mirror in the old dressing-table that they kept in the sewing-room.

"I wish you'd have this, Ruth," she said after a moment. "It's too pink for me. I wouldn't have minded a pink stripe, but——"

"Oh, do get that idea out of your head. No, I won't have it. You are getting just like Hester. You'll be calling yourself an old maid next."

"But I am," answered Alma, and all at once smiled her charming smile.

"Nonsense!" said Ruth emphatically.

"Well, if thirty isn't an old maid, what is? Thirty-two?"

"You won't be any different at thirty-two from what you are now."

"And thirty-five?"

"That's five years off."

"Five years isn't an awfully long time."

"A lot can happen in five years. Look how everything changed for Hester in a few months."

"A lot can happen even when you are seventy, but you won't be young at seventy. You know what makes me feel old, Ruth. I went to see Irma Myers to-day. We used to be in the same class at

school. Her little girls are ten and eight now. And she was talking of what she hoped they would do when they were grown up. I said 'But that's a long way off.' And she answered 'Oh, I don't think so. The years soon slip past. Before I know where I am I'll be a grandmother.' Well, you see, Ruth, while other women are talking of being grandmothers in a few years' time, I am still making myself pink dresses."

"Talk about grandmotherdom doesn't mean much. I used to when I was five. But you won't say I was too old then to wear a pink dress, will you? Wait," she broke off, "just a minute, Alma. Turn this way. Those gathers at the back seem to be uneven. I'll arrange them on you as you stand."

"So it seems I'm to go on wearing pink," said Alma with the wistful little smile that had always been one of her chief attractions even when there was no reason for its wistful quality.

§ 2

Lately Alma was beginning to find herself isolated. It was all very well feeling more attuned to Ruth than to Hester when Hester was there. But now that Hester was away the gap she left seemed to be unaccountably wide. Hester with her sharp decisions, her strong convictions, her simultaneous love and hatred of life, had filled out existence for all of them. They realised it now that she was away. . . . But Mr. Grant still had his little circle of old friends. Ruth was one

of a cheerful, easy-going crowd of young men and women; young men in khaki or out of it, young women interested in them whether they wore khaki or not. But she herself was beginning to be left companionless. Her contemporaries were nearly all married—wives and mothers. They were interested in their domestic arrangements, in their husbands and children—each one lived in a small world of her own. They sometimes invited Alma into it, and when she accepted the invitation somehow made her feel out of it. She was not of the free masonry of married women.

They liked to boast to her. They would tell her about their husbands; what they liked, what they thought, what they did. About their households; the problems and the management of them. About their social activities; where they went, whom they invited. About their children; how beautiful they were, how witty, how uncommon, how surpassingly attractive. The most ordinary woman in the world made no scruples in her claim to having produced a wonder of the universe as a personal extension. Particularly if their husbands had once admired Alma—which happened in a good many cases—they took care to make Alma understand subtly (and sometimes not subtly) how devoted and attentive to them these husbands were. If they had never succeeded in stirring Alma to jealousy they were not to blame. The only half-realised but quite vivid intention was there.

Alma listened sympathetically and interestedly.

But now and then she felt a little tug at her throat. Had she missed the happiness of life? And yet, how could she have married a man she did not love? She tried to recall her feeling for René van Reede. He was now a vague memory, something she thought of contemptuously and yet half-yearningly. . . .

Some of her friends had married without love. And they seemed not regretful. They were interested in their homes, their clothes, their children, their social and financial status. They had a great partnership with their husbands. Did this thing they call love matter? Was there such a thing?

At times Alma put the crucial question to herself: but were they really happy? They did not all look happy. What significance had looks though? And was anyone ever really happy?

Of late this function of confidante had become Alma's chief social occupation. If her married friends could boast to no one else for fear of superseding boasts, they could still boast from their matrimonial pinnacle to Alma. They were not deliberately cruel. They were merely following the irresistible human impulse—the visible and audible pride of home, husband and children, which Nature has put in the gentlest of women as one of her schemes for the encouragement of matrimony.

But Alma was being gradually left out of the little affairs at her friend's homes. She realised

herself that she was difficult to fit in. She was out of place among the young unmarried folk in the early twenties; she was an odd one among the married couples. Even the bachelors in the thirties preferred to be paired off with the younger women. There was beginning to be attached to Alma a suspicion of the shelf. In a larger circle than the one she moved in there would have been room enough for her. But the circle that revolved around her was small. She was beginning to feel squeezed out of it.

And then she could not visit where she was not visited. And her friends who had husbands went with them where there were other husbands.

"Why don't you go out any more?" Ruth asked her one day. "Bored with the baby-talk?"

Alma answered "Perhaps."

§ 3

They were down at Muizenberg, leading the same old seaside life—the hotel, the inflated charges the dressing, the surfing, the seaside walks, the meetings at the pavilion, the introductions, the talking and laughing—a life of determined enjoyment punctuated by food and drink. Ruth was in her element, her round young face sun-flushed under her panama; her splendid, even teeth habitually a visible part of her smiling mouth; her becoming skirts blowing about her white-clad legs, walking with a gay little twirl of

sheer happiness with other happy young girls or with one or other or several of an admiring multitude of young men.

She was an expert surfer, and twice daily for an hour at a time she would rush, stretched flat on her surf-board, to the shore riding the eager waves. Right on to the sands they would bring her, her lithe, slender figure and flashing white legs and brightly-bound head and wet, laughing face. And she would turn over after a moment and get up and run leaping back into the waves carying her surf-board under her arms.

Alma, after a shorter dip, would sit and watch her. Sometimes a young admirer of Ruth's would join Alma. "She surfs beautifully, doesn't she, Miss Grant?"

The life was unrestrained and natural. Men and women entered the sea from different parts of the bathing pavilion but met in the water. On the sands a mixed humanity stared at an equally mixed humanity as it disported itself in the ocean, mermaids of girls, fat, timid, old women, screaming children, daring swimmers in the distance.

Alma was looking better than she had done for a long time. The sun-flush seemed to round out her thinning cheeks; she felt happier. An incident happened which not only touched and amused, but somehow vivified her. A young soldier of twenty-one about to leave for Europe fell manfully in love with her—swore that nine years was nothing to an eternity of passion—maintained violently that a man of twenty-one battling the

world was essentially older than a woman of thirty living a sheltered life—refused to accept his rejection as final—and departed for Europe on a voluminous chord of vows, protestations and promises.

It all made Alma feel younger—and yet suddenly much older. But she found it interesting in a life not so interesting as it used to be.

§ 4

On the little station at Muizenberg there were at all times during the day parties of holiday-folk waiting for what the train would bring. And there Ruth stood one day, her hands in the pockets of her crêpe-de-chine sports-coat, her eyes gay in her sunburnt face, idly watching the load of passengers as the train ejected them.

Suddenly she stepped forward:

"Why, George Buckle!"

She grasped a gray-sleeved arm firmly. The owner of it turned and stared at her, his face white.

"Is it——" he said stiffly. "It's Ruth!" he exclaimed.

"Of course, it's Ruth! Who on earth did you think it was?"

The colour came back slowly to George's face.

"I thought—— Well, I'm dashed. You've grown up, Ruth." He spoke easily enough now, more easily than she had ever heard him speak.

"And how did you manage to make such a success of it?"

"George! Where did you learn to pay compliments?"

"I'm getting old and bold, Ruth."

"Do you know how long it is since we've met," Ruth reminded him as they struggled through the crowd towards the station gates. "Five years, six years. What have you been doing with yourself all the time? Where have you sprung from now? Have you come for a holiday? Are you staying long? Are you married? Are you here by yourself?"

George held up a protesting hand.

"My dear Ruth. You overwhelm me. Wait a bit. Yes, it is a long time since we met, and, if you want to know, I've spent the intervening years making money. And I've been to German West. And I'm not married. What are the other questions?"

"How long are you staying for?" Ruth prompted him.

"I don't know. I'm visiting my aunt in Cape Town. At present I have only come down for the day. And how are all of you?"

"Shall we walk down to the beach?" suggested Ruth as they passed the gates. "And I'll tell you the news."

They turned towards the beach and walked along the wet sands.

"Well, we're all right. And Hester's married, you know."

"Is she? Who's the man?"

"He's from Kimberley. At least, they are living there now. He's a diamond-buyer."

"And you and—Alma?" He made an effort to say the name naturally and very nearly succeeded.

"Oh, we are just jogging along."

"And having a good time?"

"Oh, rather. I think we'll find Alma somewhere on the beach. Yes, there she is. Look, near the steps. With the little basket."

George looked, and for all his efforts at indifference felt a tightening at his heart. But he achieved an outward nonchalance as he approached the steps.

Alma was gazing seawards and did not notice their approach among the shifting crowd.

"Alma!" called Ruth triumphantly.

Alma turned her head and met George's eyes squarely.

"How are you, George?" she said quite naturally, as if she was expecting to see him.

And George said to himself " She's changed!"

CHAPTER XXI

§ 1

A FEW days later George Buckle settled down for a holiday in Muizenberg. He had at once resumed his old comradely relations with Ruth, but between him and Alma matters progressed more awkwardly. There had been too much and too little between them in the past to make every thing quite easy for the present. To that simple "How-are-you" that Alma had mechanically uttered when she suddenly saw George for the first time in many years there had succeeded a period of embarrassment charged with memories.

Yet Alma was happier than she had been for a long time. She had finally decided on her future. She would marry George. He was obviously going to speak again, and this time she would say "yes." Her values had changed. She no longer saw George as a too-fair, too-shy, too-devoted adherent. She did not consider him plain any more—she saw in his face character, honesty, an air of authority. As a matter of fact, she would not have cared whether he was plain or not. There was comfort in George, she told herself. There was solidity and safety. On him a woman might build her life. She hardly realised that she was not the only person who had made that discovery. That there were many who found him

solid and safe and comforting, and wanted him as a foundation to build upon. It seemed to her that she had achieved a unique insight into a personality. She said to Ruth tentatively: "George has improved a lot, hasn't he?"

And Ruth answered slowly: "He's just like he always was. Only you never used to see it before."

Alma pondered. Was that really so? Well, she would let the future redeem the past.

She thought of the long time that had elapsed since first she had known that George loved her. She might easily have married him ten years ago. If she had done so, would she have been happier? Probably. And poor old George, he, too, would have been happier. He was so essentially a domestic animal—the sort of man who created a home, and established a family.

Still they were not too old yet, they had all the future before them. . . .

Alma felt herself in calm waters.

§ 2

"Do you know," said Ruth to Alma as they went up to their room after lunch, "I think George must be very well off."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, don't you believe one can tell somehow whether a man is spending his money painfully or extravagantly or comfortably. George spends his money so comfortably. You feel he is dipping his hand into a very deep pocket."

"I never notice these things," said Alma.

"No, of course not. You are so unpractical. I am really the only practical one in the family."

"I suppose you are," Alma admitted meditatively. "But what about Hester?"

"Oh, Hester is clever and all that, but she's a bit queer, isn't she? I mean, you are never sure where you are with Hester. So she can't be practical. By the way, I met George in the water this morning. He says would we like to drive down to Paarl to-morrow and go over the wine-farms. We would, wouldn't we? You'll see him this afternoon yourself, but I've promised already for both of us. Don't you think he is giving us an awfully good time?"

Alma agreed that he was.

Ruth opened her mouth to speak, closed it again, and suddenly allowed her words to rush out.

"George and you—I mean, George used to be fond of you, wasn't he?"

Her face was scarlet as she asked the question.

But Alma met her without embarrassment.

"George and I were very good friends."

"Friends you call it!" exclaimed Ruth. "I know you could have married him over and over again. Everybody knows that. Why are you such a hypocrite, Alma?"

"Hypocrite!" Alma repeated aghast.

"Yes, hypocrite! Or I don't know what else. . . . What are you going to do about George? You've kept him dancing around for

twelve years now—ever since I can remember, anyway. It makes me sick."

"I don't know why you should worry about it," Alma returned with unexpected sharpness.

Ruth was silent for a moment, then she said: "I don't know why I should either . . . I think I'll take a magazine and go and read on the beach."

As she left the room, Alma looked after her thoughtfully, remembering how long ago, when she was a little girl, Ruth used to say "You ought to have George, Alma. He's decent."

She smiled to herself. Ruth should not be disappointed.

On the sands that afternoon Alma said to George: "I understand I have promised to go for a drive with you to-morrow."

"Yes, Ruth thought you would be free to come."

"She told me about the arrangement, and, at the same time, gave me a lecture."

"She did? What about?"

"About you," answered Alma, deliberately daring.

"What did she say? She's a good little pal, Ruth."

"Oh, just a general lecture. She is under the impression that she's the only person who has ever done you justice."

"So she is. I said she was a good little pal, didn't I?" George exclaimed with warmth. "But what," he looked at Alma squarely, "does she find to complain of in your attitude towards me?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what is your attitude towards me?"

"It's a difficult question," said Alma, a little tense in expectation of his next remark. She had precipitated matters. She knew it. And she had done so not altogether unconsciously.

"Won't you answer it?" said George. And, suddenly, failing in courage, shelved his fate. "Some day?"

Very nearly Alma found it in herself to say "Now." But dared not.

There was silence between them, and then George said: "Have you had tea yet? Come to the pavilion."

§ 3

That night in bed Alma allowed her imagination to wander. It travelled, in fact, to Johannesburg. There it built a house and furnished it, filled it with friends, with eager duties, with happiness.

Alma knew exactly how she wanted each room to look. She would have a lounge rather than a drawing-room; a lounge of easy chairs, and cushions, and rugs, and heavy linen curtains, boldly embroidered, and old Dutch brass, and flowers everywhere.

She would have the dark, indigenous stinkwood in her dining-room, a round table, chairs of comfort. She would have coloured prints of the old Dutch masters everywhere. And many books. She would have a tiled bath-room and scullery. . . .

Her mind turned off suddenly. How many servants could George afford to keep? Was he really as rich as Ruth thought? . . .

She tried to picture life with George. Well, it would be contentful rather than romantic. George was not a romantic person. Neither was she. It was better that way. The thing people called affection rather than that extraordinary emotion, love, should bind them. A feeling of gratitude towards George came over her. He was going to fill with interest a life lacking interest. How long he had waited for her, dear old George! No doubt, he might easily have married other girls —she knew many girls who would certainly have married him for his prosperity, if for nothing else —but he had remained steadfast. He could have his reward. She would be a good wife to him. She would give him companionship. She would make his surroundings agreeable. She would take a deep interest in all that concerned him. . . .

And she would have children. She too would bore with baby-talk. Ruth would come and spend holidays with her. And she would bore Ruth with baby-talk.

She smiled in the dark as she thought about it. But Ruth and her father ought to settle in Johannesburg altogether. Yes, that was the wisest plan. And she would invite young eligibles to meet Ruth and marry her off. She thought of their little quarrel in the afternoon. She certainly was, as George had said, a good little pal.

Her heart warmed to Ruth, sleeping quietly across the room.

STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY
WILLIMANTIC, CONN.

CHAPTER XXII

§ 1

The Grants were back again in Cape Town. So was George Buckle. He intended, he said, to remain another month, although business duties in Johannesburg were somewhat insistent. He spoke very frankly, and not altogether without motive, about his business affairs. Mr. Grant and Ruth were more impressed than Alma; but then Alma, as Ruth often told her, had no financial instinct at all. Her idea of prosperity was so many sovereigns in the bank. And a bank seemed to her an awesome institution somehow connected with the Government. As a matter of fact, she had always been under the impression that the National Bank of South Africa was a branch of the Government.

But, like many women to whom money specifies coin, she was a sound household economist; and whatever allowance, she told herself, George would make her for housekeeping, she was quite sure that, far from being able merely to manage on it, she would actually be able to save.

Mr. Grant, who was, by nature, always on the side of the angels, and had a great admiration for success for its own successful sake, spoke to George, both with pride and deference, on the question of investments. But George was reticent. "I shouldn't like to give anyone advice on

these things, Mr. Grant. It's too much responsibility."

However, they had discussed the question of speculation and investment on a general basis, and George had gathered the idea, that out of sheer idleness and boredom had sprung into Mr. Grant's brain the notion of manipulating the money his wife had left him.

"But why?" George had said to him. "Your money seems to be very advantageously laid out."

"Perhaps," Mr. Grant had answered vaguely. "But I feel one ought not to miss such an opportunity for making money as a war affords."

Later George had said to Ruth, "I do hope, Ruth, you won't let your father go in for war-time speculation. He's not in the know of these things and he might get landed."

Alma, who was present, had had a twinge of resentment that George should have addressed himself to Ruth instead of to her. And Ruth had felt a proportionate sensation of pride at the double compliment paid her in this appeal both to her wisdom and to her influence over her father.

George was now a daily caller at the Grants—altogether a member of the family. He was their escort to all that Cape Town afforded in the way of amusement, and both girls, for many years without a male officially bound to take them about, found life very much the more delightful for his presence.

"Now what shall we do to-night?" he said to them one day about a fortnight before he was due to return to Johannesburg.

They considered the possibilities.

"I think we've been to all the shows," Ruth answered. "And to the Pier. Not to speak of the bioscopes."

"But there's a new picture on at the Novelty," said George. "Would you care to see it?"

"Aren't you getting tired of going out somewhere every other night?" Alma put in.

"No, are you?"

"I? Oh, no! I love it. We don't go out much as a rule. It's splendid having you here to take us."

George glowed visibly. "Then you'll come tonight. May I stay and have dinner?"

"Do," they both said together.

§ 2

The Novelty was one of the Cape Town bioscopes that boasted a small orchestra and occasional variety turns. When George Buckle and the two girls arrived there they found the hall very nearly full, and, after searching for better seats, they were compelled to accommodate themselves in the third row from the front.

"Well," said Ruth cheerfully, "the worst that can happen is that we'll all have stiff necks tomorrow. I hope the pictures are worth it."

It was during the big picture of the evening that Alma, her eyes and neck a little troubled by the nearness of their seats, sat back comfortably in her red plush chair, closed her eyes and allowed

her thoughts to wander away from the unending story of the screen.

Presently, as she sat vaguely musing, a little thread of memory began to weave itself into the stuff of her thoughts. At first her consciousness told her nothing further than that something dim, and yet definitely alien to her surroundings, had crept disturbingly in among the serenities of the present.

Gradually it came to her that it was the music the little orchestra was playing that was giving her this strange sensation. It was some sort of dance music. She opened her eyes for a momentary glance at the screen. Yes, there was a dance going on. An old-world dance. And the orchestra was accompanying it appropriately with this music which seemed to her familiar, and yet, intangibly, painful.

She had it suddenly. They were playing a little gavotte which, those many years ago, René had used to play on his violin, and which, above everything else, she had loved. It was a little tune so delicate, so light, and yet so poignant. He had had to play it to her time after time. And since then, strangely enough, she had not heard it.

And now here she was hearing it played as beautifully as ever she could remember. Behind her closed eyes she saw René again standing in the little corner next to the piano, tall, young, vivid, his intent blue eyes shining. And as he moved his bow he swayed slightly.

She opened her eyes and looked at the violinist

playing the little old gavotte here under the stage as the human shadows danced and laughed noiselessly over the screen. The little orchestra was well in view across the two empty rows of front seats which nobody ever sat on. She remained staring. The violinist, as he sat before his music-stand in his patch of light, seemed to be a man as tall and fair as René. But where René had had shining yellow hair he was nearly bald. His eyes, too, behind pince-nez like René used to wear, were pale and red-rimmed, and where René's face had been smooth and ruddily fair this man's cheeks were thin and lined. Her eyes wandered. He looked shabby too. Yes, this man who was playing René's gavotte and whose pinched features strangely resembled René's, was shabby as René had never been.

She felt that she could not move her eyes. Near her and behind her were hundreds of people. She could not realize their existence. Before her were passing the screened echoes of romantic events, and she could not see them. The music had changed, too, to a loud interpretation of thrilling actions, but it came to her merely as a distant jangle.

It was René, of course. But what was he doing here? And why had he not written or communicated with her all these years? A passion of contempt both for him and for herself seized her.

So this man—this shabby man with the bald head and the pinched, reddish nose playing his violin at a bioscope was the shining hero of her

youth. She had written to him, and he had not answered her. He was in Cape Town and he had not visited her. She had remembered him and he had forgotten her.

For the first time in her life an overpowering hatred for a fellow-creature possessed Alma. He looked as if he had suffered. She was glad. He had not written and he had forgotten. Over and over again the thought ran round her mind. But why? Why had he not written? Why had he forgotten? And why was he here? Would she never know?

The lights went up for the interval. George made some remark to her, and broke off. "You're looking pale, Alma."

Her voice sounded far away to herself. "Am I? I feel perfectly well."

"But she does look pale, doesn't she, Ruth?" George insisted.

His eyes fixed themselves on a member of the orchestra who was walking towards them.

"Doesn't that look like—who's that!" he exclaimed sharply.

René stopped in the aisle next to Alma. "I saw you as you came in and were looking for seats." His manner suggested both daring and uneasiness. "Well, and how are you all?"

He looked quite frankly at Alma's left hand.

§ 3

It was George who answered first. "How are you, van Reede?" he said coldly.

Ruth was staring at him curiously, and Alma too was keeping her eyes on him in a speechlessness which she found it hard to break.

"Good old George!" said René. "As steady and inevitable as Table Mountain itself. And here we all meet again as if a week instead of a decade had passed. Except for Ruth who's gone and grown up in the meantime. And how are your people?" he addressed himself pointedly to Alma.

"Father is well, thank you," said Alma, and, as she spoke, wondered that these should be her first words to René.

"And do you still live in the same house?"

"Yes," answered Alma.

"I'll come and see you to-morrow afternoon if I may," said René as confidently as ever he had said it eleven years ago. "I'm afraid I must go back now. I'm not supposed to desert the orchestra for the auditorium. To-morrow then."

Alma struggled to speak some word of refusal and found herself struck dumb. George looked from her white face to René's retreating back and there came to his mouth and eyes an expression, which, if Alma had noticed it, she would have found unprecedented and incredible.

They all three of them, by tacit agreement, sat out the rest of the performance without reference to René, or, indeed, to anything else. Once or twice Ruth made an attempt at some bright remark but it fell flat and unnoticed.

They parted almost silently.

CHAPTER XXIII

§ 1

If Alma had analysed the feelings with which she was about to meet René the following afternoon she would have found them compounded of ingredients greatly varying and at variance. There was contempt for herself, anger against René, sorrow for the wasted dreams of many years, yearning over the idylls of youth, curiosity concerning the past eleven years of René's life, apprehension of the present meeting. She told herself she would not see him when he came. Again, she decided she would see him and treat him with a light indifference that would convince him that he mattered now, and had always mattered, very little to her. Or perhaps she would receive him with undisguised contempt. On the other hand, what if she met him with merely a frank and simple question about his past silence? . . . No doubt he would tell her, too, why, since he had begun with the determination to study medicine, he had not finished with the accomplishment of a doctor's degree. Why, instead, he was playing the violin in the orchestra of a Cape Town bioscope. Why, in short, he was so obviously down in the world.

He came, greeted her easily, sat down in the place near the window where he had sat years ago.

The chair was actually the same chair, but recently recovered.

And Alma found herself in the corresponding chair on the other side of the small table. René was not quite as shabby as he had been the evening before; he wore a new collar, a new tie and new boots. They were, Alma thought with a sudden little pang of pity, pathetically new, obviously bought that day because he was coming to see her and had no other presentable ones to wear.

But in the light of day his face was even thinner and more lined than the night before, the rims of his eyes redder, his head balder. His features could not be anything but well-cut, but they looked pinched. He might have been ten years older than his thirty-four years. He did not detain Alma with artificialities.

"Of course, you want to know why I didn't answer your last letter."

Alma found herself trying to evade intimate discussions.

René brushed her irrelevancies aside easily.

"I have often wondered why I didn't myself—and I don't know. There was no special reason. I suppose I am like that. I must have personal contact to keep a personal feeling alive. Of course you couldn't understand it. And wondered at me. And then hated me."

He was being perfectly truthful and simple. Nothing he said admitted of protest or contradiction. Alma was silent.

Presently he continued: "And so old George is still knocking round. Why didn't you marry him? I suppose he has got on in life. Fellows like George always do, don't they?"

"Yes," said Alma.

"And fellows like me always don't Were you surprised to see me playing the violin at the Novelty last night?"

"I thought you were going in for medicine."

"I was. But circumstances prevented me. My uncle, who used to make me an allowance, died intestate a year after I entered Guy's. And his sons, my cousins, who inherited everything, found better uses for their money than to keep a too civilised relation in London to acquire English manners and English qualifications. My cousins, you know, are sound and honest Dutchmen. Not peculiar outgrowths like myself with a taste for music and an indifference to nationality. They believe in Africa for the Africander, and the Africander for Africa. They aren't foolish or ignorant. They simply have their point of view. And from their point of view they saw no necessity for throwing away money on me while I played about London. I suppose they were quite right too."

He broke off and looked out of the window, towards the gate. "There's George just come in," he said. "But I think he's joining Ruth on the side verandah. Perhaps you want to see him. Shall I go?"

"What happened then?" said Alma.

René turned back to her with a shadow of his old familiar smile.

"Then, for a while, I went more or less to the dogs."

Alma found his frankness extraordinarily disconcerting. Instead of condemming him it somehow justified him. His telling her himself about it seemed to make the process of going to the dogs a perfectly rational and excusable course of action.

"What did you do?" said Alma.

"I lived on my landlady for a time. She was rather a decent landlady, and she had a daughter. Afterwards I got an occasional job as violinist. But I never stuck to any job long. Generally it was my own fault. No good. I hadn't the stamina to work."

Again Alma found all her conceptions of right and wrong displaced and confused by his frankness.

"Did you give up medicine at once?" she asked.

"Yes, I left Guy's just before my first exam. I should probably have failed in any case. I was always useless at exams as you know. . . . Well, afterwards a time came when I found I couldn't get a job for months on end. And I just went on living with my landlady and owing her the money for my room and board. Then I got ill, and she and her daughter nursed me. When I got well again I married the daughter. She died nine months ago."

It seemed to Alma that her heart turned over with a convulsion that left her physically ill. She

continued looking at René with what she dimly hoped was an appearance of polite interest. He did not seem to notice anything unusual. After a while his voice came to her as from a distance.

"My landlady's forbearance with me had all along been due to her. She was always very good to me. And when I couldn't keep a job she never failed in hers. She had charge of a crockery department in quite a biggish shop."

He stopped for a moment. "She wasn't beautiful and hadn't much education," he continued presently. "But she was always very good to me." He seemed to have nailed his thoughts to the phrase.

His voice sounded clearer to Alma now.

"And then you came back to Cape Town?" she said.

"I came back a month ago," he answered. "I found my cousins prosperous but unsympathetic. I joined the Novelty orchestra only last week. It was time too."

Again there fell a silence between them. And then René said in a low voice:

"I never loved her, Alma."

Alma found herself looking at him quite calmly.

"I am sorry to hear that," she said.

For the first time that afternoon a certain sureness of himself that had unconsciously been irritating Alma ever since his arrival dropped from René.

For a moment his ready answer failed him. Then he said:

"Well, I hope you've been happier than I have, Alma."

His repeated use of her name irritated her afresh. She had no wish to bandy sentimentalities with this bald-headed widower with the red-lidded eyes. Only now did she realise how essentially his good looks had counted in her estimate of him. He had been so handsome. If she turned her eyes away she could still see him as he had been when first they met.

The contrast between René of the past and René of the present was disillusioning. No longer compelled by outward attraction, she saw him now for what he actually was. A weakling who had been content to live on a woman; who admitted himself a weakling; and was satisfied with his weakness. And she had thought him a man among men. He had towered in her estimation above poor George with his prosaic merits. Suddenly she craved for George's sanctuary. How steadfast George was! How a woman could trust him! . . . And he was sitting there on the verandah quietly talking to Ruth while he waited for René to go. Through all these years he had been waiting for René to go.

And why didn't René go then? She looked at him with impatience. He was telling her about himself again—he seemed to be interminably telling her about himself. Now he was making a bid for her sympathy.

"I was practically starving when I joined the Novelty orchestra."

"Why didn't you join the forces instead?" Alma asked him.

He stared at her cold face with surprise. "I wouldn't have been accepted. My heart is bad, my lungs are not too good, my eyes have always been shortsighted."

He rose and smiled his old challenging smile at her. "Well, Alma, times have changed. And I have changed even more. How different everything was the last time I was here. You would not have been anxious for me to leave you then."

He was no longer smiling. "Oh, Alma, how young we were! I felt the world at my feet. And now all I feel is a tiredness everywhere. God, what a wasted life!"

There was still a quality in him that could make the words sound natural and not theatrical.

He held out his hand. "May I come again? Friends are scarce these days. I am as humble as you like."

Pity struggled in Alma—the pity that is akin to contempt and not to love. But it was the only pity he was daring to ask for

"Yes," she said, "if you wish."

CHAPTER XXIV

§ 1

George was still sitting on the verandah with Ruth when René left, and, after Alma had been to her room to see whether any traces of emotion were visible on her face, she joined them. She found things constrained. There was a look in George's eyes as they rested on her which she could not account for and which troubled her.

A few minutes later he left them.

"To-morrow then, George?" Ruth called after him and he answered "Right."

"What did René van Reede have to say for himself?" enquired Ruth after George had gone. "I saw him come in a little while before George. He has changed a lot as far as I can remember. He used to be rather good-looking, I thought. But, of course, I was very young then."

"Yes, he was good-looking," said Alma.

"What happened about him, Alma?" Ruth asked curiously. "I never quite understood. Did he make love to you?"

"Not exactly," said Alma.

"Well, he doesn't look altogether an acquisition now, does he?"

She got down from the verandah rail where she had been sitting, and went inside whistling with great cheerfulness. Alma stood looking out into

the growing dark, revolving in her mind the things René had told her. . . . Presently her face hardened to a great determination. Her eyes shone, and her cheeks grew pink. Her heart began to beat quickly and unevenly.

§ 2

The next morning she met George at the gate. She had seen him coming and had gone out to meet him. He greeted her a little stiffly. But she was hardly surprised.

She spoke to him quickly. "George, I want to say something to you."

"Yes?" said George.

"Won't you come inside?" suggested Alma. "Or let us sit on the verandah."

They sat down on the basket chairs on the little side verandah next to the dining-room where they had been sitting the day before. For a few moments Alma found a difficulty in beginning what it was she wanted to say.

Presently George asked her if Ruth was in.

Alma told him that Ruth had had to go to the dentist at ten o'clock, but that she expected to be back before eleven.

"Yes," said George. "I promised to take her to Camp's Bay at eleven." He looked at his watch. "It is twenty to eleven now."

"Perhaps the dentist is keeping her," Alma remarked.

"Perhaps," agreed George.

Alma watched the shadows of the vine leaves

that covered the verandah as they danced with small bright patches of sunlight on the verandah floor.

Then she spoke suddenly.

"George, do you remember saying to me last month at Muizenberg that one day you would want me to tell you what my attitude was towards you?"

She rushed the words out and paused, breathless.

George turned towards her.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you want me to tell you now?"

The expression on George's face disconcerted her, but she went on with blind determination.

"Long ago you said if ever I changed my mind about——"

"No, Alma! Don't!" George interrupted, his voice shaking.

After a moment he added: "Yesterday afternoon I asked Ruth to marry me and she accepted me."

"While I was sitting there talking to René?"

"Yes."

"I hope you will be very happy," said Alma after a few seconds' silence.

George got up from his chair and walked the short length of the verandah. He came back and stood before Alma. "After waiting for twelve years, my answer comes a day too late. . . . But you don't mean it!" He stopped himself. "You never cared for me, Alma. I knew it all along."

"Don't talk about it any more," said Alma.

"I'm sure everything is best as it happened. Ruth will make you a better wife than ever I would have done."

"Tell me one thing," said George. "When did you make up your mind about me definitely?"

"When you came to Muizenberg."

"And why?"

"How can I tell you?" She remembered the house in Johannesburg, the baby-talk!

Again George walked down the small verandah. Alma watched him with a vague interest. So people actually did walk to and fro when they were agitated. She found herself wondering why. She could not conceive herself doing it. Besides, she felt weak at the knees. She sat very still.

For a second time George stopped before her.

"What was van Reede doing here yesterday?"

A little smile flickered across Alma's face. "I think he wanted sympathy."

At her smile George suddenly grasped her hands. "Marry me, Alma. Forget everything else. Say yes. Say yes."

Alma withdrew her hands. "No, George. I wouldn't now. I couldn't any more. Oh, leave things as they are. It's Fate, I suppose. . . . There comes Ruth," she added.

Ruth approached with a wave of her hand.

"Hallo, you two!" she cried. She looked quickly from one face to the other. "Have you told her?"

Alma got up and kissed her. "I know all about it, and I think it's splendid."

Ruth put her hand on George's arm and turned her face, young and rosy, but a little anxious, towards him. A feeling compounded of self-pity and pity for her took hold of George. Yes, he would play the game with her. She cared for him. All his years of devotion to Alma had never earned him this reward that Ruth was giving him gladly and spontaneously. His eyes travelled from her face to Alma's. Alma's face was a little haggard and old beside Ruth's. But she smiled at him as he looked at her, and the old yearning returned in a flash to his heart.

Alma moved away.

"Don't let me play gooseberry," she said, and left them.

In her room she sat down in the rocker before the window, her eyes unseeingly on the trees in the garden. She had waited too long. And now she had nothing more to wait for. She had allowed the Present to swallow the Future, and now there was no Future left. She thought of the house in Johannesburg, domesticity with George, a new life, new hopes, new happiness. And George was going to marry Ruth.

Unexpectedly a little feeling of contempt for George worked its way through her other thoughts. In twelve years, with every wish on her part, and every chance on his part, he had never once been able to thrill her into an emotion.

Yet she had been ready to marry him. She had asked him to marry her. She had based her life on marriage with George. And this humilia-

tion was the only fruit that had matured from the seed of her hopes. For the rest, her life stretched before her a blank. She saw herself endlessly playing double-dummy with her father, who, for all he considered her a bad player, would rather play double-dummy with her than not play at all. She would live with him clinging to the by-gone generation, instead of linking herself with the present generation to make a bridge for the generations to come. All her human capacity would exhaust itself in the filial relationship.

She felt quite definitely that she would never marry now.

Her mind went back to René. It was this man —this worn-out failure of a man—whom Fate had destined to come between her and happiness.

CHAPTER XXV

§ 1

The first month or two of Hester's married life passed quickly and as in a dream. They had settled down in an hotel in Kimberley. It was obviously the best thing for them to do. John Oliver's business of diamond-buying kept him on the road most of the time, and for Hester to live by herself in a house in a strange town would have been lonely to the point of desolation. And there were no flats in Kimberley greatly worth living in.

At the outset Hester had found interest in the mere fact of being married. But presently she began to look round for some small occupations with which to pass the time. As the two rooms they had at the hotel were to constitute their home, she undertook to make them as agreeable as possible. She contrived loose covers for the chairs; made cushions and curtains; re-arranged the furniture; replaced with others the set of pictures representing a large-eyed actress in different poses in "The Rosary," filled the shelves with books, and the vases with flowers.

John Oliver was delighted with the result. "You've made this home for me, Hester," he said. "I've never had a home before."

"I wonder how you managed at Lost Hope,"

Hester smiled at him. "You aren't very domesticated."

"How do all the diggers manage?" he answered readily.

Hester's first disappointment was when she discovered that John Oliver did not care for music. At first when she played he used to stand beside her admiringly, put his hand on her hair now and then, and kiss her enquiring face as she looked up for commendation after she had finished playing. Sometimes he used to remark with awe: "How wonderful your fingers are, running up and down so quickly and surely."

But soon Hester discovered that in music, apart from her playing of it, John Oliver had no interest. She would ask, "Shall I play that thing you liked so much the other night?" And he would say, "Yes, do," obviously not knowing in the least what it was she meant.

"Oh, John," she said at last. "I don't believe you know one piece of music from another."

"What if I don't?" he smiled unrepentantly. "I like them all when you play them. It's like Heaven to me to see your trim little shape sitting on the music stool, and your quick little fingers dancing about the key-board—it is a key-board, isn't it? The mere fact of your being my wife and playing to me is all I can think about. Now play again. To please me."

"But it makes no difference to you what I play."

"Play the things you like best yourself."

In time, however, Hester began to feel a little

irritated with this uncomprehending admiration.

"I wish you *understood,* John," she complained. "It makes me lose interest when I feel you really don't appreciate the music for what it is "

"Well, teach me to appreciate it," John Oliver said agreeably.

After that she tried to explain to him what she was playing; who the composer was; what sort of a man he had been; what it was supposed to represent; what made it beautiful. She told him the familiar story of the blind girl and the "Moonlight Sonata," which appealed strongly to John Oliver, and, after that whenever she sat down to play, he would demand the "Moonlight," until she refused to play it any more. "Do try to like something else," she pleaded.

But gradually John Oliver's fictitious interest in music began to die away again. He still used dutifully to ask Hester to play to him, but if she continued for any length she would hear him presently gently turning over the leaves of a book or newspaper; or, sometimes, if the piece was of the softer kind, she would look round to find him fast asleep. She would leave off playing abruptly, and he would wake up with a start. "That was beautiful."

"But it wasn't a lullaby."

"Forgive me, little Hester. I'm tired. Diamond-buying is a tiring business."

She began to lose interest in her music herself presently. She had not enough musical passion to be able to devote herself unencouraged to music

for its own sake. She required an incentive, a community of musical sympathy, an audience.

By degrees she left off playing as a regular thing. And when she sat down at the piano it was more at the instance of conscience than at the prompting of inclination.

To a large extent reading filled up her time. She received a few calls from other diamond-buyers' wives, whom she found not too interesting; returned the calls; chatted occasionally in the lounge with other residents of the hotel But the days began to seem unutterably long. And, to her dismay, even the evenings, with John at home, began to seem longer than they should have done. He would tell her what had happened on his trip, what he had bought, how much he had paid. She would repeat to him the gossip she had heard that day in the hotel. And then suddenly there would be nothing more to do but go to bed.

§ 2

They found little to interest them socially in Kimberley. People were divided here, Hester soon found, into two sharply-defined layers—the de Beers crowd and their hangers-on, who constituted society; and the rest.

Although Hester, from her early life on the Diggings, was well enough schooled in awe of de Beers, her long sojourn in the Penninsula had dimmed for her the classic significance of the great monopoly. But here in Kimberley, the people were still trembling and stumbling in the shadow

of it. Nothing could be said against de Beers, nothing could be done without de Beers, nobody could exist unless de Beers permitted it. And de Beers owned Kimberley not only metaphorically, but, to a large extent, actually as well. It was kind to Kimberley as the master is kind to a slave. And the kindness, it seemed to Hester, itself made for enslavement. Hester always thought of Kimberley, with its ugly, haphazard streets, its corrugated-iron houses, its acquiescent population, as a slave city.

A man, whom Hester had once met at the hotel, had asked her what the population of Kimberley was. Hester had told him. "Why, it's only a village!" he had exclaimed. "And it talks and acts in the way of a great city!"

Hester had admired the quick observation of the man. That was it exactly It was a small, stagnant town, but socially, it modelled itself quaintly on London. Its gossip and its gatherings might have taken place in Mayfair. Its club might have been any London club, its race-meetings the Derby, its Friday night bioscope the Covent Garden Opera.

Hester was soon initiated into the tradition of this Friday night bioscope. It was accepted that this night was the society night. And on Friday nights, accordingly, the place was crowded to overflowing with social parties.

There was no regular theatre at Kimberley. Occasionally a theatre-company played there, but the very big companies, that before the war had

occasionally visited South Africa, exhausted themselves at four or five of the biggest towns—Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and perhaps Bloemfontein—and then returned home.

During three or four of the summer months Kimberley was uninhabitable, and then all who could afford it, and many who couldn't adjourned to the coast to join there the Johannesburg throng. In July or August, without climatic excuses, they went to Durban. And, in general, during the year, such gay dogs as there were went to Johannesburg, as, in pre-war days one might go from London to Paris. . . .

§ 3

But from Hester's point of view, Kimberley was a small, dull, town which bored her and where she had neither friends nor occupation. She was soon forced to admit to herself that marriage was not in itself the life-work she had imagined. She had looked upon marriage as an end. She found it not even a means to an end.

The days began to drag interminably Even Saturday afternoon and Sunday which John Oliver spent with her seemed hardly short enough. She had discovered very soon strange deficiencies in her husband as a companion. Things which were to her a commonplace struck him in the light of puzzling novelties. He was loudly appreciative of the obvious. His taste in books, pictures, and plays was undeveloped—almost elemental. And yet he had flashes of insight. He had read a

certain amount of romantic literature, and a little poetry; but he had not touched even the fringe of modern thought. He made bold assertions, which he argued baselessly and obstinately; was inevitably on the side of the angels in politics; loved the monarchical system and the House of Lords; and looked at life from the purely sentimental aspect. Hester, who was by nature against the accepted order of things, a radical and a republican, often despised him when he vented his political views. He objected to women's suffrage, and his hatred of anyone black or coloured was violent. It seemed to Hester that they could find no common ground for mental association.

And yet, on the other hand, he was not without his points of attraction. He was open-hearted and generous, had spasms of self-depreciation that were not without their charm, and admired her as she had never before been admired. The things she said, the things she did, the things she wore were alike beautiful to him.

But even there he began to irritate Hester after a time. In her person as in her music she disliked indiscriminate approbation.

The picture of the god-like youth on the mound was beginning to fade from Hester's mind. She began to treat him in a spirit of faintly ironic condescension.

§ 4

The trouble with Hester was that she was devoting too much attention to her own internal

complexities. She admitted it to herself and began to look around for an outside interest But none presented itself. And, for all her eager, intolerant mind, she had no physical initiative. She required a spur—contact with some forceful personality—before she could spring into action. But, unfortunately, she was not likely to find that forceful personality in Kimberley.

CHAPTER XXVI

§ 1

One Saturday afternoon John Oliver came up from the bar of the hotel in a state of quiet sourness. He refused to have the cup of afternoon tea that Hester made for him with her electric kettle, refused to tell her what was the matter with him, refused her offers of ministration. His breath was smelling strongly of whiskey, and his mood seemed to Hester to be abnormal.

Presently he sat up on the settee where he had been lying and said suddenly:

"I shouldn't be surprised if it's all your fault."

"What?" asked Hester astonished.

"Well, I'd better tell you. I've got the sack from the company."

Hester looked at him, wordlessly.

"Yes, I've got the sack. And it's through you."

"Why?"

"They say at the office I've been paying too high prices. Too anxious to buy, and the company have been losing money on my stones."

"How is that my fault?"

"They've got a down on me through you. You've been treating their wives badly——"

"I haven't, John. You can't say that"

"I say you have. I know what I am talking about. And they are paying you back this way.

I don't believe a word about the too high prices. If I understand anything I understand diamonds."

"But I do," said Hester. "Only the other day you dropped a hint to me about having to give up living here. They must have been warning you then already."

"And I say it was your fault then too. You are altogether too high and mighty, Hester. I feel it, and I suppose the other diamond-buyers' wives feel it too." He got up from the settee. "I expect they tell their husbands how superior you think yourself, and say they wish you could be taken down a peg or two. And that makes me unpopular in the office. And this is the result."

"Where's your friend, Mr. Pitt? Can't he do anything for you?"

"In America. And I've lost my chance, my only hope of a new beginning in the world."

He walked moodily about the room, kicking the furniture every now and then.

"It's your fault, Hester——" he began again.

Hester flared up suddenly.

"It's not my fault, and you know it. Or you would if you hadn't had too many whiskies."

"What's that you're saying?" he demanded quickly.

"I'm saying it's not my fault."

"You said something else." He caught her by the wrists. "You said something else. Repeat it. Go on. Repeat it."

"Oh, don't worry me, John." She wrenched herself away.

"You think I'm drunk," he insisted.

He collapsed all at once on to a chair, and tears came into his eyes. "Yes, I am," he said. "You're right. I'm drunk. First I ruined my life, and now I've ruined yours. And you'll never forgive me. I know you won't forgive me."

Hester looked at him with a pity born of contempt. "It will be all right. Don't worry, John. Go and rest a bit. And when you feel better, we'll talk it over again."

John suffered himself to be induced into the bedroom. Presently Hester heard him snoring. She was looking from her sitting-room window at the little people walking about in the street below, trying to understand what being ruined meant.

§ 2

John slept till next morning. After breakfast he made confession: "I'd better tell you the truth. They gave me notice over a month ago. I hadn't the heart to tell you, Hester. I—did give too much for a couple of stones. It's true, I did. I was mad to speak like I did yesterday. I don't know what put it into my head. Well—I thought perhaps they would have been less hard on me if we were on friendlier terms privately. But that can't be helped now."

Hester began to feel very sorry for him. "Poor old John! Can't you buy on your own?"

"No capital," said John Oliver.

"There's the money that father gave me."

"Not enough. There's the car and the running expenses, besides ordinary living, before I could even begin to buy. And besides, the guarantee."

"Then do you want to go back and dig?" Hester asked with a sinking heart.

He shook his head. "I don't want to. But I don't know what else to do. I have no training for anything. I didn't tell you. I applied to go Overseas yesterday. They rejected me. My leg isn't good enough yet."

Hester drew his head down and kissed him. "Poor old John!" she repeated. "Then it will have to be the Diggings," she added after a moment. She braced herself. "Let's make the best of it."

"It's a terrible ending to my hopes," said John Oliver.

"But it's not the end."

"I wish it were—of me," muttered John Oliver despondently. "You shouldn't have married me, Hester. I told you so at the time. I warned you I was no good. But I didn't dream I would bring you down to an existence on the River Diggings."

"I've been there before," Hester pointed out.

"Under different circumstances. You had a splendid home. This will mean living—you know the way ordinary diggers live."

"We'll make ourselves comfortable. Oh, cheer up, John. Don't you remember my often telling you I'd rather live on the Diggings than in Kimberley. I meant it, you know."

"You splendid girl!" cried John Oliver enthusiastically. "You do buck a fellow up! Dash it all, if you don't mind, why should I?"

"I suppose you'll go back to Lost Hope," Hester said a little later.

John Oliver's face set sharply.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't go there for anything."

"But at least you know the people there."

"That's why," said John Oliver after a moment's hesitation. "I told them I wasn't coming back again, and I won't. They would sneer at me."

"Well, it's as you consider best," said Hester. . . .

When she thought it over later Hester looked back on her conduct not without a small feeling of pride. At a critical moment she had shown herself strong. She had not repined or discouraged. Indeed, she had mustered the faltering forces, and rallied them.

CHAPTER XXVII

§ 1

At Steytler's Rush, a newly-declared diggings, John Oliver, with the assistance of a couple of "boys", put up a small house of corrugated iron. It consisted of two rooms—a bedroom and a living room, and near by they threw up another little shanty for kitchen.

When the erection was completed, John Oliver stood before it ruminatively. In the November sun the little corrugated iron house—which all good South Africans would speak of as a "zinc" house—glared hotly. There was no shade for miles around—not a solitary tree. Small wild plants grew on the ground, with here and there a bush or an unattractive little flower, but, in chief, Nature substituted here for the amenities of civilization, nothing but an expanse of sand and stones.

There were a number of tents, and one or two other haphazard dwelling-places about, also a store of the perpetual corrugated iron. But, on the whole, Steytler's Rush was an even more desolate place than the Lost Hope of John Oliver's early manhood.

He wondered what chance of happiness a man and a woman might find at Steytler's Rush. The place seemed to him so ugly and hopeless. . . .

And yet he had heard that people raved about the beauty and inspiration of the veld—its subtle colouring, its sunny distances, its enchantment of sky and earth, its message.

To him it conveyed nothing except digging-possibilities. A man called Steytler had chanced here on a "pocket" of diamonds, and immediately there had been a rush. Among those participating in the rush was John Oliver. But, hitherto, only one man besides Steytler had had the luck to stumble on a pocket. About fifty other men were drawing blanks in what was simply a natural lottery. Either there were accumulations of diamonds or there were no diamonds at all. From the depth at which a man struck washable ground, he might know what were his chances of success.

Already some, their hopes and capitals exhausted, were trekking away.

John Oliver's chief reason for coming here had been not so much his fatalism, as his anxiety to be as far as was possible from Lost Hope.

§ 2

A qualm struck John Oliver as he went into the hot, little house. This was no place for a woman who had ever lived otherwise. He wondered how Hester would bear it, and tried to persuade himself that what he could bear she could bear. They were man and wife. Whither he went she must follow.

Now that he had been married to her for over six months, the first miracle of her wifehood was

wearing off. Although he still looked back with shame and dread on his past life, he had reached the stage where he was now and then able to forgive himself. Sometimes it no longer seemed to him that he had forfeited the rights of white humanity. If he had sinned, he had suffered and repented. And there were not many men who had the strength to free themselves even from shackles of their own forging. His life to-day was upright, stainless. He was trying to make an honest living for the woman he had married. Nothing mattered but the future. The past was dead.

And yet, was it dead?

He sat down on a box, elbows on knees, head on hands, and his mind flew back. What about these four living relics of the past? They embodied the past. They carried the past into the future. He remembered what he had said to McInerney about them—that they stood for worse than murder. Being infinite where murder was finite. . . .

But again, as regards his actual sinfulness. If he had lived with Annie and had had no children —if in other words, his sin had borne no fruit, would it still have been a sin? Surely the measure of sin was its consequence. Where was the wrong of wrong-doing if it wronged no one? . . .

Then might he not look at it this way? If he had not lived with Annie those four children of hers would have had a coloured father as well as a coloured mother. How were they worse off in having had a white father? On the other hand,

of course, both their parents might have been white. Well—it cut two ways.

But the sum of it was that they complicated existence exceedingly. After all, he had not been able to break away from the River Diggings. Going to war had not been a permanent solution. And what could a man do but dig who knew nothing except digging? . . .

He wondered if Steytler's Rush was far enough away from Lost Hope to make it safe as far as Hester was concerned. He knew of one man who had brought a white wife to live with him in the very house that had shortly before harboured her coloured predecessor. Yet apparently she never discovered the fact. Or if she did, she overlooked it. There was a certain quality of honour on the Diggings which silently buried a man's past. And the coloured women themselves never presumed to make any disturbance. They knew exactly their position in the white man's life.

§ 3

It struck him that, although he had already been married to Hester for six months, he did not actually know her yet. For instance, how would she take such a discovery? Would she make a fuss, and, finally, through sheer impotence, forgive? Hester was a strange woman. There was no knowing the workings of her soul. Indeed, there was no knowing the workings of any woman's soul. Apparently they were not very fastidious about these things. There was no woman so pure but

she was able to overlook a man's impurity—evidently on the assumption that to the pure even the impure is pure. And once a man's past could be forgiven, what did the colour of that past matter? . . .

Suddenly a feeling of great weariness fell on John Oliver. All this was quibbling. A man was what he had done. He himself embodied his past.

He remembered the day he had first met Hester. He had felt as if he could open his arms to embrace the world. He had felt at one with the gods themselves.

And now! There sprang into his mind some words of Byron that he had casually read, and that through many years he had hugged torturingly to himself. "No more, no more—oh, never more on me the freshness of the heart can fall." . . .

CHAPTER XXVIII

§ 1

As Hester approached Steytler's Rush in a diamond-buyer's car, her heart sank. She had lived on Diggings before. But never on such Diggings. John Oliver had tried to prepare her. "It's only a rotten little two-roomed house," he had told her, "but we must hope not to have to stay there very long. Are you quite sure you would rather not go on living at the hotel till I can provide something better for you?"

She had steadfastly refused.

"I am ashamed to take you there," he had protested again and again when he had gone into Kimberley to get out some furniture for the house.

"What's good enough for you must be good enough for me," she had replied. And the fact that she voiced his own excuse to himself seemed somehow to make the weight on his conscience heavier.

The motor ploughed its way through the sand. In front of one of the little iron houses stood John Oliver, and his smile of welcome to her as she stepped out of the car was wistful.

"You arranged for your luggage to come by wagon?" he said, as he helped her with the odd parcels she had brought with her in the motor.

"Yes. It will be here the day after to-morrow. I have brought enough to go on with."

"You won't need very much here," said her husband. "Steytler's Rush doesn't take much living up to."

They entered the little house together.

"Well?" said John Oliver, waiting for the verdict.

"I think we'll be very comfortable," said Hester.

"Do you really mean it?"

"Certainly I mean it."

He put his arms round her. "Oh, Hester, you shouldn't have married me."

"That's a fine welcome for a wife."

"You know what I mean."

"Poor old boy, it's all right. We can be as happy here as anywhere else."

She wondered if her voice carried conviction. She was thinking, "How can one live here?"

The hot unbroken outlook through the open door was depressing. She went into the bedroom to take off her things. . . .

Comfort had been attempted as far as was possible. The house had been whitewashed outside, and lined with board inside. The dung-smeared floor had mats on it. There were a few comfortable chairs and two tables. The furniture of the bedroom—with the exception of the beds and a looking-glass—had largely been contrived out of boxes. The kitchen was slightly primitive as regards utensils, but it had a small stove.

"Will it do?" asked John Oliver. "I had to

buy the things with your own money, and I hated to spend more than was barely sufficient. Oh, Hester, I couldn't even provide a home like this for you!"

"Will I have a servant of some sort?" Hester asked.

"Mrs. Benjamin, the store-keeper's wife, sent a girl along. She is over at the store now getting something. I think you'll quite like Mrs. Benjamin. She's a foreign Jewess, but she's a decent little soul, I think. She helped me fix up here, and told me what we needed in the kitchen."

"Are there any other women?"

"None you'd like. Mrs. Benjamin wanted to know if you were fond of reading, and sent some books over."

"It's very good of her. I'll look at them later on. After I've had a cup of tea and unpacked my things. By the way, have we any tea?" she added.

"There's Maria now," said John Oliver. He stood at the door and shouted: "Maria, bring the missus some tea."

§ 2

With a certain amount of curiosity Hester looked at the books Mrs. Benjamin had sent over. They would be, she told herself, some index to her neighbour's personality. But the selection was varied enough to leave her blank.

"Well, anyway she does read something," she thought, "which is more than those Kimberley women do."

And she began to look forward with some pleasure to meeting Mrs. Benjamin.

She had not long to wait. Towards evening, as John Oliver was showing her his claim, she saw a little, quick woman approaching them. She introduced herself with an eager little smile.

"I am Mrs. Benjamin. I am so happy you have come here."

Hester warmed at the genuine welcome.

"I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, Mrs. Benjamin. I couldn't have found anything more pleasant waiting for me in my new home than your books."

"Did you like them?" asked Mrs. Benjamin. She smiled. "I'll tell you a little secret, Mrs. Oliver. Last night when I was making the selection I said to my husband "I don't know what kind of a woman she is. What can I send?" And he said "Mix them!" so I mixed them."

Hester returned the confidential smile. "And I looked at those books to find among them some clue to Mrs. Benjamin, and was unable to do so because of your husband's advice."

They both laughed. Mrs. Benjamin chattered away as one starved of small-talk. She spoke with a strong accent. Her vowels were very broad, and her "w's" and "th's" in spite of her determined efforts, failed to be anything but "v's" and "t's." But her grammar was accurate, and her choice of language, if anything, too good to be quite home-like. She was an attractive little woman with large grey eyes and masses of smooth

brown hair that shone with quiet richness as the setting sun struck her bare head. Her features were anything but Hebraic, yet no one would have made a mistake about her nationality.

"Well," she tore herself away determinedly as the sun began to sink lower. "I must go home and put the babies to bed. You will come and have tea with me to-morrow morning, Mrs. Oliver. Please come. I have no one but my husband to talk to, and he, poor man, will soon be deaf if I don't find another outlet."

She ran away with a little wave of her hand.

§ 3

Mrs. Benjamin was waiting for Hester on the verandah of her little house as she walked up the next morning. It was a house made of unburnt brick and white-washed; and there was already a creeper beginning to feel its way along the wires which were tempting it up the verandah. On the verandah were a few plants in halved paraffin tins, painted green. The store of corrugated iron was within fifty yards of the house. In the doorway stood a tall, fair man in shirt sleeves, who raised his hat to her and smiled as she passed on her way up.

A small barefooted boy in a pair of very short white trousers and an open tennis shirt joined Mrs. Benjamin on the verandah, and examined her with large grey eyes.

"We're all waiting for you," said Mrs. Benjamin as they shook hands. "After I left you

yesterday I suddenly remembered that I should have visited you first. But you must forgive an old pioneer."

"How long have you been here?" asked Hester, as she sat down.

"About four months. Still, I was the first woman here and that makes me a pioneer. Will you have tea or something cold?"

"Tea, please. Then are there no other woman here at all?"

"Two. But of what you call the poor white class. One is slightly coloured. The other is white enough, but"—she shrugged her expressive foreign shoulders. "That is a peculiar type—the poor white. Don't you think so, Mrs. Oliver? An interesting study. But I suppose in Cape Town you don't seek for such studies to pass the time. There are other things to do there."

Her voice was wistful.

"Oh, but I come originally from the River Diggings, myself," explained Hester. "Didn't my husband tell you? My people had a farm in these parts years ago, though I was generally away at school. So I am not quite new to the life here. At least, I know enough of it not to want to remain too long."

"This is the third camp we have been in," said Mrs. Benjamin. "I came out from Russia ten years ago to marry my husband, who had then a little shop at Bosman's Kopje. The little shop is still there. We have a partner in it now—a brother of Mrs. Ellman of Lost Hope. And I took

English lessons from a digger's wife who used to be a teacher before she married. But my accent is still very bad. Don't you think so, Mrs. Oliver?"

"It is not at all bad," said Hester.

Mrs. Benjamin shook her head decidedly. "It is, I know it."

She looked through the window.

"There is my husband," she said with a little gesture of pride.

Mr. Benjamin came in and greeted Hester in tones that at first puzzled her. After a while it dawned on her that, through association probably with an Englishman of the public-school type, he had acquired a peculiarly English intonation which, superimposed on his own natural foreign accent, had resulted in this quaint effect. She could not help smiling as he spoke. And he smiled good-humouredly back. "My accent. What am I to do? It always amuses people. I don't know why."

They began to talk about digging prospects. Mr. Benjamin told them that he had heard down at the store that another man had found that morning three diamonds in his wash.

"I hope the luck will spread to your husband," said Mr. Benjamin as Hester rose with a plea of preparing the lunch.

They both accompanied Hester as far as the store.

"We must meet again soon," said Mrs. Benjamin.

§ 4

In a very short while it began to seem to Hester that her life at Steyler's Rush centred entirely on the Benjamin household. She had never before come across foreign Jews of just that type. Instinctively she had always had the impression that foreigners were somehow a little ignorant and under-bred. But these people had a warm courtesy and a rapid intelligence that she had never encountered anywhere else. In every direction their minds threw out feelers. They were always discussing and arguing. As Mrs. Benjamin remarked: "We dare not agree, Alexander and I. If we could not dispute, how else could we pass the time?"

Nevertheless, Hester discovered other ways they had of passing the time. For instance, they read Shakespeare to one another almost every day. And very often if she and John Oliver came up at night they would find Mr. Benjamin in the act of putting away certain books. "I'll tell you," Mrs. Benjamin confided to Hester one day. "Poor Alexander has a passion for mathematics, but he never went far enough at school. Now he tries to continue by himself. Only he does not like to be found doing school-boy problems . . . Is it not a waste, Mrs. Oliver, for a man with a brain like my husband to have to spend his days selling a "tickey" sugar or a "tickey" coffee to Kaffirs? But that is why we left Russia. We Jews had no chance there. Only a small percentage were allowed to go to University. And so people like

Alexander came out to South Africa and opened Kaffir-shops, instead of staying at home and becoming great engineers or scientists . . ."

All sorts of newspapers abounded in the Benjamin household—besides the local paper, there were Russian papers, American papers, English papers, even, occasionally, a French paper, and sometimes an impressive-looking review. They knew a good deal more about the War than almost any person Hester had previously met. "You will see, Mrs. Oliver," they would say to her, "such and such will happen next." And very often, Hester found, they were quite right.

At night the four of them would have tremendous debates. Then John Oliver would vociferate his monarchical opinions against their republican ideas; the arguments would become very heated; and too often Hester would find herself out of sympathy with her husband, and a little ashamed of him.

Gradually, Hester noticed, the Benjamins began to abandon these discussions with John Oliver. And he, for his part, would boast to her: "They can't tell me anything. After all, they're only ignorant foreigners."

But when it came to discussion about the War, Mr. Benjamin would spread his hands out in a survival of foreign gesture, and would say: "I cannot talk with you on an equal basis, Mr. Oliver. You have fought and suffered, and I have sat peacefully at home trying to make a little money."

At which John Oliver would soften. "We don't

expect a man with four small children to go and fight." And, as he said it, his blood would stand still. He too was a man with four small children. But his children did not count.

Once Mrs. Benjamin said defiantly to her husband: "I would not let you fight even if you had no children."

"Not as a Jew receiving sanctuary from England?"

"Oh, Alexander, I have not a noble mind. I cannot see great issues. My heart breaks at the thought that in making an end of Germany, we are like poor, blind Samson pulling down the building on himself to crush the Philistines. To me it seems like death together."

"But if Germany insists on fighting?"

"I don't know. Don't press me. I confess I do not understand." Mrs. Benjamin made a little, helpless gesture, and walked towards the door. "Come and look here."

The moon was just rising in florid grandeur from behind the low hills. A soft light beautified the barren veld. There was a great peace all around them.

"This is religion," said Mrs. Benjamin. "And to talk of war on a night like this is blasphemy. Shall we go for a little walk?"

She went into the bedroom to look at her sleeping children before leaving the house, and motioned to Hester to come too.

As they went out gently she said: "And all those men without legs, without arms, without

bowels, without faces, burning and freezing and rotting, were once like these babies of mine—sweet and soft and whole. Oh, Mrs. Oliver, do you believe good can come out of this?"

CHAPTER XXIX

§ 1

It was due largely to Mrs. Benjamin's enquiring mind that she and Hester made the Kaffir location a frequent objective of their walks together. To Hester the Kaffirs and their mode of living was so much in the natural order of things, that she had almost ceased to notice them. But to Mrs. Benjamin they were matter for inexhaustible curiosity and discussion. "Why does nobody trouble about them?" she demanded persistently. "They are human beings, and if you don't like to think of them as human beings, as least they are beings. Why doesn't the Government do something for them? What are there missionaries for? Isn't it a humorous idea, Mrs. Oliver, to give them law and religion, when what they need is bread and sanitation?"

To Hester, whose fresh vision had been dulled by custom, her friend's indignation was like a flashlight. She began to see their desolation—to realise how this location, for instance, must appear to seeing eyes.

There the huts lay against the hillside, an aggregation of human dwellings, made generally of old tins and rags, sometimes of mud and rushes. Into these huts, through small openings, men, women and children crawled to pass together their days

and nights, and infect one another with diseases. Almost every native was vilely diseased. Small children went about with fallen-in noses. Whole families died off within a few short years. They received and transmitted the "bad sickness" with fatalism as a manifestation of the inscrutable ways of Providence. It never entered their minds to attempt to cure themselves. One was born, one was cold, one was hungry, one got all, one died. That was the Kaffir destiny. The thing was hardly worth discussing.

It seemed to Hester that the natives had deteriorated since she had left the Diggings as a young girl. Or perhaps it was only that she had not noticed before. She put it to Mrs. Benjamin.

"Certainly they have deteriorated," Mrs. Benjamin said. "Every year the disease becomes more rampant. And now they are starving as well. Food and clothing are so dear. And though diamonds have gone up, wages have gone down, because de Beers is not taking on many natives since the War, and so they have to work for the diggers for whatever they can get."

Hester winced mentally at the unintentional reference to her husband as a sweater of natives. "But we have nothing either," she told herself.

After a moment she explained to Mrs. Benjamin that her mother used to say it was the Rinderpest in '96 that had finished the natives on the River. All their cattle had died then, and so they had gone to work for the diggers, and had never since recovered their small agricultural status.

"Oh, but they are moribund," said Mrs. Benjamin. "They have given up striving. They do not trouble. They live for the day. They do not plant because next year does not interest them. Quite possibly they will be dead next year. Look at this location, Mrs. Oliver—how bare it is. Not a little thing planted by anyone. Not a mealie-sprout, not a fruit-tree, not a common little flower. In winter they even have to buy fuel from us. There isn't a thorn-bush left on the veld around."

"Nature isn't encouraging here," commented Hester.

"But I do not blame the Kaffirs!" cried Mrs. Benjamin.

§ 2

And, indeed, starving, sick, and filthy, what interest had they in the beauties of inanimate Nature? . . . Hester began to notice the thinness of the little native children, their nakedness; the incredible raggedness of their elders. Of course they could not buy clothing nowadays. The shoddiest stuff was beyond their means. They had even given up patching. Their garments hung by an occasional strip to their bodies. Some natives wore sacks instead of coats.

But it was summer now. Any covering was, for the present, only a matter of convention. What about the winter?

She asked Mrs. Benjamin how they managed during the winter now that clothing was so dear.

"I wasn't at Steytler's Rush last winter, but I

suppose it is the same on all the Diggings. Oh yes, it was terrible enough last winter. I remember on a very cold day I was going into Kimberley with one of the diamond-buyers. And I had on thick under-clothing, and a coat and skirt, and an overcoat with a fur collar, and high boots. And I felt by no means too warm. There were three or four little Kaffir girls watching me as I drove away. I assure you, Mrs. Oliver, they were naked. Perhaps they wore a little rag of a garment—but when I say a little rag you understand how literal I am. . . . One of them, I remember, had nothing except a little piece of pink nainsook that she was clutching round her shoulders for warmth. I felt like a criminal. Yet what could I do? I help a little where I can. But I am one poor woman, and they are so many." . . .

Looking at her little servant Maria, another aspect struck Hester. The location was more than a mile from the river. The natives had no other water-supply. It would never have entered their minds to dig a well. So they had to fetch water in buckets and tins from the river. How did they wash themselves. Hester wondered. She asked Maria who, outwardly at least, bore some semblance of cleanliness. Maria was highly amused, and explained that she washed her face and hands in a bucket. And her body? Hester inquired. Maria's amusement increased, but she volunteered the statement that in summer the young girls sometimes went down to the river to bathe.

"And in the winter?"

No answer. So Hester understood that in the winter bodies were not washed at all. For that matter, she had never noticed even in summer any thronged pursuit of cleanliness in the river. Occasionally there were one or two young girls or some little boys in the water. Quite young ones. And now and then she had seen working "boys" of various ages go into the river. But what did the older women do? The answer was obvious. They never washed their bodies at all. A woman of sixty had quite probably not had a bath for forty years. She had passed her days from youth to maturity, from maturity to senility, through sickness and maternity, unspotted by water.

"It's too awful," Hester said to Mrs. Benjamin.

"But it's true," commented Mrs. Benjamin.

CHAPTER XXX

§ 1

Hester had discussed the possibility of children with her husband, and now there was one definitely coming. . . . The knowledge brought a certain amount of peace to John Oliver's heart. "Well, there's that between us," he told himself. "Nothing she can find out now will break things up."

And as the weeks passed by empty of damaging discoveries, despite the occasional advent of men from Lost Hope coming to participate in the new Rush, John Oliver gradually learnt to put fear behind him.

"Hallo!" they would say to him. "Respectable, what?"

And at first he would look at them uneasily, but in time he learnt to face them brazenly.

"And a good example for you too, Smith. Why don't you find yourself a nice girl, and settle down?"

Yet he never introduced Hester to them without a certain amount of nervousness. They were good fellows, of course, and would never deliberately give him away, but still—a thoughtless word, even a charged look, and the thing was told. Hester was no fool and knew the Diggings.

He had often wondered that Hester had not questioned him more closely about his past life. Did women never ask? Were they indifferent or were they frightened?

"It's part of the game," he decided. "They have to hug their ignorance, or, in decency, they couldn't get married at all. And once married they've got to keep on shutting their eyes and pretending for the sake of their own self-respect. It's all hypocrisy anyway."

But certainly he felt stronger for the new link that Nature had fashioned between them.

§ 2

There was trouble in the Benjamin household. The coloured girl who looked after the children had disappeared that morning without a word of warning. She had received her month's wages the night before, and had stolen away as silently as the tent-folding Arabs. There had been no complaints, no disputes, no recriminations. It had simply entered her woolly head that she wanted to leave and so she had left.

When Hester arrived Mrs. Benjamin was sitting at her machine stoically sewing some pyjamas for her son, Leon, who was going to school next week. The two youngest were weeping in tones of loud bitterness on the floor beside her. Hester attempted to silence them, but they refused to accept comfort.

"They want Jacomina," explained Mrs. Benjamin. "Well, they had better begin to learn

early in life that we cannot have all we wish."

"Nan-nie!" wailed her offspring in chorus.

"Nannie gone," said their mother.

"Nan-nie!" they repeated vociferously.

"Nannie bad girl," their mother pointed out.

"Nan-nie!" they howled with vigorous loyalty.

Mrs. Benjamin smiled wryly at Hester.

"I am making the old mistake," she said, "trying to reason with unreasoning beings."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Hester. "Can't I help you with Leon's things? You surely haven't much time for sewing with the four of them on your hands."

"That is very kind of you," said Mrs. Benjamin. "But one of the diamond-buyers who was at the store this morning promised to ask my friend, Mrs. Ellman—I have mentioned Mrs. Ellman to you, haven't I?—to try to find me a girl. And I am hoping that she will be successful."

"Can't I do anything in the meantime?"

"If you will keep an eye on these two admirers of Jacomina, I will get some tea. I haven't had anything to-day yet myself. I hadn't the heart to eat."

With a new feeling of interest Hester devoted herself to pacifying the children. They looked at her with large pathetic blue eyes and sobbed intermittently; but finally the baby fell asleep, and the elder one, deserted by her ally, became somberly quiet.

§ 3

Another couple had come to Steytler's Rush, and John Oliver's heart sank anew when he saw that the man was a particularly objectionable little coloured fellow whom he had known in Lost Hope —if a contemptuous acknowledgement of another's existence could be disposed of by that term. This man—his name was Ford—was one of those coloured inhabitants of Lost Hope for whom long custom and a white father had combined to produce the necessary qualifications for drinking in the "white" bar.

He had social aspirations and the soul of a climber. Although obviously coloured himself, he spoke with contempt of such people as he choose to designate by the word "Bastard," and he had all the white man's revulsion against the native. It would never have entered his mind to associate with them on any terms except that of master and servant. On the other hand, he would readily have sold his soul to the devil for a perfectly white skin. And he had, at least, ensured a certain bleaching in the skins of his descendants by marrying a girl of "poor white" extraction—that is, a nominally white girl of degenerate parentage with a dash of colour in her somewhere. However, for all outward purposes, she was white enough.

In the old days at Lost Hope, John Oliver had frequently met Ford in the white bar, but he had rarely spoken to him. Now Ford sprang at him in the manner of one who suddenly sees a familiar face on a strange continent.

"Hallo, Oliver! You here!"

"Yes," said John Oliver. "You too, I see."

"That's right," grinned the other, "old friends always meeting."

John Oliver set his teeth together.

"Both turned over a new leaf too, and got white wives," Ford said. "I'll tell my wife to go and see yours."

"Please don't—trouble," said John Oliver.

"No trouble"—Ford assured him. "I'll tell her."

"Don't," said John Oliver quietly.

Ford looked at him in silence for a moment, and his brown face grew browner.

"Who the hell are you?" he said as he turned away.

John Oliver went back to his work laden with apprehension.

"God, if I could get away from here before it's too late," he thought.

Later he told himself that he should have dealt more wisely with Ford. And that evening, as he met him on the way home, he joined him in a conversation of forced amiability that left the coloured man exultant, but undeceived; and himself embittered—and also undeceived.

§ 4

The sword hung over John Oliver's head, but apparently Ford did not intend immediately to sever the thread that held it.

Sometimes he thought that he ought to warn

Hester—or, at least, to sound her. But, as often as he brought forward the subject, and she looked at him with her uncomprehending eyes, his courage deserted him.

Once he said to her—speaking of the white man at Steytler's Rush who had the coloured wife—"What do you think of that couple?" To which Hester answered: "Well, he is such a degraded brute generally that his coloured wife doesn't seem anything out of the way. I wouldn't waste a thought on a man like that."

"That's a bit hard, Hester," her husband remonstrated. "What if that man reformed?"

"What could he reform into?"

"I don't know. Something better. He might go to the front, and make an excellent soldier. He might be extraordinarily brave. He might save someone's life. My dear girl, all sorts of things."

Hester shook her head. "Not that man," she smiled at her husband. "Because you are naturally brave, you assume all men are."

And there the matter ended, without great comfort to John Oliver.

But now lately his buoy of hope was the coming child. Hester, since the promise of its advent, seemed, he thought, to be more drawn towards him. He had never been able quite to probe the feelings on her part which had led to their marriage. And the more he knew her the less he understood her. But, undoubtedly, she was more tender towards him these days.

CHAPTER XXXI

§ 1

It was about this time that news came to them of Ruth's engagement to George Buckle. And it was Alma who wrote, giving Hester the information in elder-sisterly terms.

"We are very pleased about it," she concluded her letter. "The wedding will take place quite shortly—as soon as Ruth can get her trousseau together."

Hester spoke of it to her husband as they were having lunch. "Are all men like that?" she said. "There was old George worshipping at Alma's feet for twelve years, and suddenly he goes and gets engaged to Ruth."

"Well, how much longer did you expect him to occupy the position of footstool?" asked John Oliver.

"But I certainly gathered from Alma's recent letters that the affair was still on between George and her. She never suggested Ruth as a possibility. She didn't speak directly, of course. But George was always doing this or that for her, or taking her about. And she seemed quite reconciled to the idea of George."

"Perhaps George didn't want her to make a martyr of herself," suggested her husband.

He got up from his seat at the table, strong and brown, and put his arm around her. His neck where it was exposed by the open shirt was still straight and vigorous, for all it now lacked the unwrinkled grace of youth. Hester looked at it as he kissed her.

"Married life is good for you, John," she said. "You are again as handsome as when I first saw you."

"You don't mean it, Hester. You're flattering me."

"Oh, yes! I certainly mean it."

"Am I making you happy then?"

She nodded.

"If only I could find something in this afternoon's wash! Come and bring me luck."

"I'll come just before it's time for you to knock off, and we can walk home together."

"That promise is worth a diamond," said John Oliver, as he walked off towards his claim.

And actually, as Hester came towards his claim at about six that afternoon, he ran towards her, making exulting gestures.

"What did I say your promise was worth?" he said.

"A diamond?" said Hester breathlessly.

"A little beauty." He took a match-box out of his trouser-pocket, and opened it. "What do you think it weighs? I guess eighteen carat. I ought to get two hundred pounds for it easily. It turned up only five minutes ago. And when I looked up after putting it away I saw you just

coming over the rise. So you really brought me the luck."

"If I hadn't come over the rise wouldn't it have been there?" laughed Hester.

"I don't know. It never was before. So that proves it. And we needed a little luck just now, didn't we?"

They walked home together arm in arm, the world illuminated by the diamond. A little breeze carrying the smell of rain had sprung up, and they both raised their heads eagerly to meet it.

A little way off, but walking almost parallel with them, a young girl was wheeling a perambulator.

"That must be the Benjamins' new nurse. I think it's their perambulator," said Hester. "Yes, there are the children," she added as they approached closer.

Her husband assented indifferently.

"One of these days I hope you'll take more interest in nursemaids and perambulators," Hester chided. "I wonder that Mrs. Benjamin should trust her children with such a young nurse. But she is rather a pretty little girl and nearly white. You know, John, there seems something familiar about her. She reminds me of some one, but I can't place it. Look, John. Whom do you think it is she resembles?"

John Oliver looked obediently, but did not answer. After a time he said: "It's your fancy." He walked along so quickly that Hester had almost to run to keep up with him. In a few sec-

onds they had left behind the nurse-maid toiling along with her perambulator and its double load.

"I'm tired," said John Oliver. "Let's get home."

§ 2

There was only one thing to do—to get Hester away from Steytler's Rush as soon as possible. If not, it was just a matter of days before they both, living as they were on the edge of a precipice, found destruction.

After all, it had been ridiculous of him to expect that he could bring Hester anywhere to the Lower Diggings without the certainty of discovery. But he had never anticipated the possibility of what had actually occurred. He reconstructed the scene in his mind. He was experiencing one of the happiest moments of his life. Never had he felt Hester nearer to him. He had the diamond in his pocket—luck and, with it hope. They were walking home together through the rain-scented dusk, united by a fresh tie.

A little way off Mrs. Benjamin's new nurse was wheeling along the two youngest Benjamins in their perambulator.

Hester was teasing him: "One of these days you'll take more interest in nurse-maids and perambulators." And then she had added—and every word was a brand—"She reminds me of some one, but I can't place it. Look, John! Whom do you think it is she resembles?"

He had looked up obediently, and had encoun-

tered the placid, slightly amused gaze of his daughter Maggie. . . .

The wish struck him—and it brought a faint, bitter half-smile to his lips—that Mrs. Benjamin had perished in some Russian pogrom before bearing children and importing nurse-maids.

But it was Fate. His secret was too little of a secret: his past too bound up with the present. If not Maggie, then Ford. If not Ford, some one else. As long as Hester remained at Steytler's Rush, discovery was bound to come.

§ 3

That night he said to her with sudden determination: "Hester, I think you ought to go away. I hate you to be here just now—feeling as you do."

There was anxiety in his voice, and it touched Hester.

"But you don't want me to leave you alone for about a year, do you, John?"

"I don't want you to consider me in the matter at all," said John Oliver.

"Oh, but I must," Hester insisted. "Before anything, I am your wife."

Her words brought a little balm.

"Are you, Hester, are you? Do you mean that truly? Will nothing ever come between us?"

Hester smiled at what, she reflected, was a man's typical fear of being robbed of love by his own child.

"What's coming between us is a stronger bond," she said.

And John Oliver, following the trend of her thoughts, sighed.

"But I want you to go away. . . . If anything were to happen here. . . . And there is no doctor for miles around. . . . I'll be happier if you go."

"And the expense?"

He patted the pocket where the diamond lay. "I think we've struck luck at last. One stone usually means others. We can afford it."

"Well, we'll think of it again later on," said Hester carelessly, and was startled at her husband's vehement retort: "Later on may be too late. I want you to go at once. Hester, you must go at once."

"Why, John, there isn't any hurry in the matter of days. I've months of time to consider it."

And John Oliver, realising that his insistence might surprise her into suspicion and defeat its own object, suddenly ceased pressing her.

"Just as you like," he said wearily.

All that night he lay awake formulating plans. Obviously the first thing to do was to speak to Maggie—and to see that she left Steytler's Rush immediately. He had no fear of her betraying him, and not the least doubt of her obedience—children of colour do not make uncalled for confidences—but her very appearance, that suggestive resemblance to some one that had so sharply struck Hester, and that sooner or later would certainly be explained, was danger enough.

§ 4

On his way home from work the next day John Oliver found himself face to face with his daughter wheeling the Benjamin perambulator. He had puzzled his mind for an opportunity to speak to her and here it presented itself ready-made.

"Well, Maggie?" he said.

"Yes, Pa," said Maggie.

"What are you doing here?"

"Minding Mrs. Benjamin's children."

The simple return left Maggie's lips calmly. The sight of her father did not in the least agitate her. She accepted the world as she found it. Girls with brown mothers and white fathers made no filial claims. Sentimental rights did not embarrass them. They took what was given and waived the rest.

John Oliver stood looking at Maggie, searching her colourless, yellowish countenance for resemblance to himself. No feature was exactly like his, yet there was something about the setting of the eyes—the contour of the face—that was undoubtedly suggestive. She was a tall, handsome child, and looked more than her twelve years. Her quiet, self-contained bearing annoyed John Oliver.

"You know I don't want you to tell me that," he said irritably. "I want to know *why* you are here."

"Ma said I must work."

"But why did you leave Lost Hope?"

"Mrs. Ellman got this place for me."

"Does Mrs. Benjamin know your name?"

"I just said 'Maggie.' "

Again John Oliver stood in silence.

"How is your mother getting on?" he asked finally.

"Ma is staying in the location."

John Oliver felt the hot blood in his face.

"What is she doing?"

"Washing. But Grandpa helps her."

Grandpa! Good Lord! Old Marthinus, whose Kaffir wedding he had attended.

"Jimmy died last year," Maggie announced casually after a while.

The intelligence conveyed little to John Oliver's heart. Jimmy was dead. Jimmy had been his son. The two facts seemed hardly related.

"What was the matter with him?" he asked, and acknowledged to himself that courtesy more than sorrow prompted the question.

"He was sick," said Maggie. "He had the 'bad sickness.' "

At that a sudden anguish bit John Oliver's heart. The "bad sickness"! He knew too well what the "bad sickness" was. The first man he had ever seen in Lost Hope—he was the last man he had seen there too—the one-eyed boatman who had rowed him across the Vaal the day he arrived there—was the remains of that sickness. Many of his own claim-"boys" had died of it. The old had it, the middle-aged had it, the babies were

born to it. Only the other day Hester had wondered in shocked tones at their own immunity.

The "bad sickness"! How was Jimmy not to catch it living in the location? He looked at Maggie in a horror of curiosity.

She answered his look. "I haven't got it, Pa."

John Oliver found that he was shaking.

"He was sick in his chest, too," she continued after a moment. "And then he died."

Presently she added, by way of further social information:

"Ma drinks a lot."

John Oliver braced himself to the stern necessities of the present—he could hear nothing worse than he had already heard.

"Listen, Maggie," he said, clutching the edge of the perambulator with trembling hands, "you have to get away from here. I'll give you anything you like. I'll send some money to your mother. But you have to leave at once."

"Yes, Pa," said Maggie obediently. "Must I walk?"

The simple question overwhelmed John Oliver. Was she to walk from Steytler's Rush to Lost Hope, this twelve-year old half-caste child of his?

He stared before him helplessly.

Suddenly coming up the path, over the same rise that had revealed Hester yesterday at the moment he had found the diamond, he saw Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin approaching them in a leisurely walk.

He bent over the perambulator as if to play

with the children. "Meet me to-night at the shop, Maggie, after Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin have gone to bed."

"Yes, Pa," said Maggie.

CHAPTER XXXII

§ 1

Ruth and George had got married quietly one day in early autumn, had sailed from Cape Town to Durban en route to Johannesburg, and had left the cheerful household that had settled in Cape Town so hopefully fourteen years ago, represented by a querulous sickly old man, and a faded, sweet woman of thirty-two.

At first Mr. Grant had inclined towards an ornamental wedding; and Alma, whose one fear was that she might betray discomfort in the matter of her sister and George, had felt bound to agree with him.

But Ruth herself had protested. "Why should we, father? We are a small family. We have no relations here. Even old Hester can't come. And it's war-time anyhow. I'd much rather—really much rather—do without a demonstration."

"But I don't want all my daughters to get married in this hole-and-corner fashion. It was all right for Hester. Nobody knew the fellow. But George is well-connected here"—Mr. Grant was distinctly complacent about having achieved a substantial son-in-law—"and I don't see why we should hide ourselves away over the business like this."

"Well, if George wants us to get married quite soon, it can't be a big wedding," said Ruth, "and that settles it."

And, in fact, that did settle it. They all—including Mr. Grant—understood why George wanted to get married soon. There was a state of tension between the sisters which, for all their mutual efforts, they were unable to bridge. The affair between Alma and George had been so long a tradition in the Grant household, that it was impossible to ignore its erstwhile existence. Alma herself succeeded better than Ruth. Ruth had moments of doubt, bursts of jealousy, that she found it difficult to hide.

George had left for Johannesburg soon after his engagement, and had returned to Cape Town only two days before the wedding. In the meantime he displayed himself a punctilious and painstaking lover; and Ruth, who had understanding, spent her affianced days in a state of moody uncertainty. Once she said to Alma with temper: "Why didn't you marry George yourself? Everyone knows he always wanted to marry you."

"Why do you say these things, Ruth? We were simply great friends. On and off," she added.

"Yes," said Ruth with bitterness. "Very much on or very much off."

"Well, what do you want me to do about it, Ruth?" Alma returned with sudden spirit. "Do you want me to marry him myself now?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Ruth. "I suppose you could if you wanted to."

Once or twice she even committed her doubts to letters; and then, eager to be reassured, found George's protests re-assuring.

George himself felt them to be not quite so re-assuring. But he, too, was anxious for an early marriage. "Once we are married," he told himself, "it will be all right."

The wedding took place early in March.

§ 2

It was on their honeymoon that Ruth and George had their first quarrel. Ruth had never travelled by sea before, and was surprised at her own capacity for biliousness. The sight of George—eupeptic and amiable, hovering over her in helpless solicitude—irritated her almost to tears. She resented not appearing at her best, she felt that she was being cheated out of what she had always understood to be the happiness of the honeymoon, she hated George for seeing her at a disadvantage.

Finally she said sharply: "George, don't come near me. I can't stand it."

"Are you feeling bad?" George asked tenderly.

"Yes," said Ruth, looking angrily at the freckles on his hand.

"Can't I do anything for you?"

"No. Only go away."

George stood silent for a moment, then went obediently out of the cabin.

As soon as he had left Ruth began to feel that he should not have been so eager to go. "He comes to see me out of politeness. He is only too anxious to leave me alone. I disgust him."

She began to think of Alma.

Perhaps George would not have taken Alma so readily at her word and gone away if she had been sea-sick. Perhaps, indeed, in the secret recesses of his mind, he still preferred Alma to her. Quite deliberately, as she herself knew, she began to taunt her imagination with barbed recollections.

When George approached her again, exasperatingly kind and futile, she sat up and looked at him in dishevelled wrath.

"George, if you don't leave me alone, I'll scream. I wish I had never married you. I know you wish it, too."

George stared at her speechlessly.

"Why didn't you marry Alma?" Ruth flung at him.

George kept his light blue, controlled eyes on her. His gaze disconcerted Ruth.

"Why don't you answer?" she demanded.

"If you insist, I shall," said George, forcing himself to coldness. "Because you happen to be a little sea-sick is no reason why you should insult me."

"I do insist," said Ruth.

"Then you'll hear it once for all. I didn't marry Alma, because she wouldn't marry me.

Now you know. And now I hope you're satisfied."

He turned to go. At the door he looked round. "Don't mention the subject again, Ruth."

§ 3

Ruth did not mention the subject again. She recovered from her seasickness and was duly ashamed of her own behaviour and resentful of George's. It became a point of honour between them to ignore the little episode. But they never for a moment forgot that there was a subject forbidden to discussion. George was more than ever conscientiously polite to Ruth, and Ruth maintained what she considered to be a pained and dutiful attitude towards George. They were both quite unhappy. It was only after they had already been staying in Johannesburg for a week, and were beginning to consider the furnishing of their new home that a cheerful interest in life began to revive.

They were staying at the Carlton Hotel, in the heart of the heart of Johannesburg, where everyone stays who wants to assimilate quickly and sharply the essence of the Rand. Probably no other hotel in the world houses so mixed a crowd. The only characteristic common to all the visitors at the Carlton is the presumed ability to pay for the hotel accommodation. For the rest, people of all kinds—magnates, actors, country store-keepers, race-goers, rich men and men not so rich,

people of importance and people of no importance, not to mention an assortment of every-day Johannesburgers—stay at the Carlton.

After two days' dalliance George returned to work, and Ruth commenced the search for furniture. She spent a week making comparative examinations and estimates. She was no judge of furniture, but she found extraordinary variations in prices for similar articles, which definitely confirmed her in the impression that she was going to be victimised; and she conducted her business of buying on the lines of a small bird over whom hovers a hawk.

After five o'clock she would take George out on a pilgrimage of furniture gazing. George had a typical horror of unnecessarily troubling shop-people. But for Ruth's firmness, the first article shown would inevitably have been the article bought.

"Perhaps we'll see something we like better," said Ruth.

"I don't think I'll like anything better than this," George would answer.

"But we might as well *look*."

"Oh, well, if you insist!"

And George would stand by in gloomy resignation while the shopman levelled at them his battery of arguments and recommendations.

In the end Ruth would say, with a side-glance at George, and an encouraging smile to the shop-assistant:

"We'll let you know later."

Outside George would say: "Really, Ruth, you women have no conscience at all. You go into a shop and trouble the people to show you things that you have no intention of buying."

"But I have the intention of buying. Only I don't want to buy the first thing I'm shown, and immediately afterwards see something I much preferred. Now, come along, we'll go to that other place I told you about."

"Don't make me go, Ruth. I hate this business of selection. I have no taste, anyway. I leave it all confidently to you."

"But aren't you interested, George?"

"Certainly, I am interested. But I can't judge furniture except by results. Now you've got an excellent little head on you. Not even a Johannesburger will get the better of you. You buy what you want and don't bother about the prices. We can afford the best. I leave it to you, partner."

§ 4

On a certain day the furniture and carpets and hangings arrived at the large Dutch house, all white distemper and green wood-work. It was much the type of house that Alma had dreamt about; and it was that type of house because through many years' association with George she had grafted her fancy on his imagination. Ruth never knew the origin of the conception of her home, and George himself hardly realised that he was housing Ruth in Alma's creation.

Inside all the rooms were low and white-walled, heavily raftered and floored in dark brown wood. They had bought furniture in the South African stink-wood that Alma liked so much—plain, solid, heavy. There were occasional riempje chairs—chairs with thonged seats—not because they were more comfortable than ordinary chairs, but because the style of the house demanded them. Such houses with such furniture were the vogue in Johannesburg when Ruth arrived there, and who should be in the vogue if not a newly-married couple?

Here and there an experienced shop-assistant would give Ruth a hint: "This is the colouring you require, madam. And if you can, get some old Dutch brass. And about rugs. I could show you some that are the very thing for your scheme of furnishing."

Sometimes ignorance combined with enthusiasm produced unfortunate results. But, on the whole, Ruth was far from displeased with the morning's work which she left behind her when she went to have lunch in town with George.

"Well, how's it shaping?" he asked.

Ruth tried to disguise her satisfaction.

"Not so bad."

"Not *bad!* Why, I thought it was going to be splendid."

"Well, you'll see for yourself when you come home to-night."

The word "home" stirred George to sentimentality.

"Do you realise that I come home to our home for the first time to-night, little Ruth?"

Ruth nodded.

"We'll be happy there, Ruth."

Ruth put her hand over his after a covert glance round.

"I'll be happy if you are, George."

They looked at one another with new understanding in their eyes. A question came to Ruth's lips. George saw it hovering there.

"Yes?" he smiled.

"Nothing," said Ruth. "I want to ask you something," she contradicted herself immediately.

"Ask away."

"No. To-night, when you come home."

"Our home," said George.

"Our home," responded Ruth.

That evening she led him in subdued triumph through the rooms. After the tour she looked at her husband in confident expectations.

He drew her towards him.

"You're a wonderful little woman, Ruth. I've never seen a house I liked better. How you did it so quickly and efficiently I can't understand. Was it a terrible lot of trouble?"

"No, it was a joy. But I wanted you to be more interested."

"I was interested, but I couldn't visualise results like you could."

Ruth pointed out various details in the different rooms, all of which George warmly admired.

Suddenly he said: "And now, what was the question?"

Ruth's face flamed.

"I'd rather leave it."

"Tell me, Ruth," he whispered. And Ruth, although there was no one to hear, whispered back:

"About what happened on board ship, George."

There sprang to George's mind a recollection of Alma's wistful face with the fixed gay smile the unmarried eldest sister wears at the youngest sister's wedding. It moved him to a little yearning pain. Poor Alma!

He looked at Ruth's flushed, questioning, round face against his shoulder. Alma stood in his heart for that yearning pain. Here was warmth, the promise of joy.

"Poor little Ruth. You were sick. And I was a brute. Let's forget it."

"But, George. You're not sorry you married me rather than Alma?"

"I'd rather be married to you than to anyone in the world," he said. And meant it.

Ruth looked at him in dewy happiness.

CHAPTER XXXIII

§ 1

Mrs. Benjamin was in fresh trouble. She sat on the little box-settee in Hester's room which John Oliver had himself constructed and covered with cushioned chintz, and spread her hands out with Semitic fatalism.

"Without a word, Mrs. Oliver. Early this morning the children were crying and I was calling her and calling her, but no answer. So I got up and went to her room. It was in disorder, the bed all tumbled about, and there was no Maggie."

"What can have happened to her?" Hester wondered.

"Oh, nothing, I'm sure. All her clothes were gone too. She must have run away, I think. No one could have stolen her. Her possessions have so carefully accompanied her flight. When people are kidnapped they don't have time to collect all their little belongings. Besides, why should anyone kidnap Maggie? No, quite simply, she has run away."

She stood up. "I just came to tell you. Please, Mrs. Oliver, if you see any likely looking girl around send her to me. Now I must leave you. When I think of it, I can't blame Maggie for not wanting to stay and look after four children. I am their mother and the thought of devoting my entire time to their service makes me hysterical.

How should I expect a strange little girl to do it for two pounds a month?"

"You're not hysterical, Mrs. Benjamin," Hester smiled. "You're much too reasonable."

"Then it's the calmness of utter despair," Mrs. Benjamin smiled back. But there was an undercurrent of worry in her voice.

Hester accompanied her a little way home, and then returned to her own small duties. John Oliver always came home for lunch, and variety in food was distractingly difficult to attain in Steytler's Rush. To-day, however, he was late. And it was nearly two o'clock before Hester saw her husband, with his almost imperceptible limp, slowly approaching their home.

"Why are you so late, John? You look tired," she greeted him.

"I was delayed," John said curtly.

He hardly spoke during lunch.

"Poor Mrs. Benjamin is so troubled again," Hester remarked by way of small-talk.

John Oliver did not answer.

"Maggie's left her. Run away without a word. She might have told her she wanted to leave, don't you think?"

John looked up with a sudden frown.

"I'm really not concerned about Mrs. Benjamin's nursemaids," he said with suppressed violence. "Do talk about something more interesting."

Hester regarded him with astonished eyes, and became silent.

They did not speak again until John Oliver was preparing to return to work.

Then he put his arms round her. "Do forgive me, dear. I didn't mean to be rude. A man is sometimes tired. Digging is hot work, you know."

Hester melted towards him.

"Oh, John, of course, I forgive you. It's my fault. I shouldn't bore you with servant talk, should I?"

He embraced her with sudden passion.

"Always forgive me, Hester. Always, my wife, always."

Only the emotion of his words reached Hester's blind heart.

§ 2

And yet although the air around her quivered its secret with every breath she drew, six weeks more passed by without enlightenment to Hester. John Oliver had practically worked out his claim —not as rich a claim as he had expected, still not an unprofitable claim—and was thinking strongly of moving to another camp, or of starting once more as a diamond buyer. . . . And as the days passed by empty of exposure he began again to wrap himself around with hope.

Hester was beginning to make maternal preparations. There had lately been no talk of her going away from Steytler's Rush without her husband.

And then one day, quietly, accidentally, unexpectedly, the unavoidable happened.

As soon as it happened John Oliver recognised it as the unavoidable, though involuntarily he struggled.

And yet, the manner of its happening was so different from anything he had anticipated. Someone, he had always thought, would tell Hester. Ford, perhaps, or Maggie, or, indeed, any among a hundred people. He might—he had sometimes feared—inadvertently betray himself. In dozens of normal ways the past could have been revealed—ways terrible and dramatic. And here discovery came so simply, so ridiculously—so unpreventably.

It was on a Sunday morning. John Oliver had bathed and shaved. He wore an open white shirt and new white flannels. His bare feet were in slippers. They were sitting on the little verandah discussing Ruth's wedding, which was due to take place next week. Every little while Hester passed an approving eye over him. He looked now, fresh from his bath, wholesome with abstemious living and vigorous work, much as he had looked when first she had seen him in his early manhood.

She told him so, and added laughingly: "Your hair is getting as long as a girl's. When did you have it cut last?" And then she added: "Do you know, John, something has just struck me. You remember that little girl that worked for just

a few days for Mrs. Benjamin—Maggie, the one who disappeared——''

John Oliver looked at his wife, his face set. ''Is my hair really so long? I must go and see in the glass,'' he said in a voice he tried to make natural. He got up from his deck-chair, and went into the house.

Hester followed him complacently into the dining-room. A little mirror hung there on the wall.

''You know,'' she continued, ''I always said she reminded me of someone. I have just discovered who it is. Yourself, John. Isn't that quaint?''

He did not answer. He was staring with intent, horrified eyes into the mirror. Over his shoulder Hester saw his reflected face. A thought—a wordless thought—a thought so indefinable as to be simply a state of feeling—came to her. It might have been merely an instinctive sense of something wrong.

After a moment John Oliver turned round.

''What nonsense you sometimes talk,'' he said. His voice lacked force.

Hester's eyes held him. All kinds of small incidents that she had never troubled to analyse or record surged from the dark repository of her subconscious mind into the daylight of comprehension—a word, a look, a tone of voice, his continual hints of something dark in the past. Only a few weeks ago he had said to her—and at the time she had attached no meaning to it—''Always forgive me. Always.'' What had he to be forgiven?

She felt as if the world were spinning slowly around her. She dared not think—and forced herself to think. She sat down on a chair. Her husband was still looking at her. Then she said: "John!" in a voice as if his hands were at her throat.

"Well?"

She tried to find something to say. Nothing came.

"What do you mean?" cried John Oliver. "Good God, what's the matter with you?"

"That girl. Why do you get angry when I say she looks like you?"

"Because it's ridiculous."

"No," said Hester firmly. She got up from her chair and walked slowly to the bedroom. John Oliver followed her.

"You're upset," he said. "You have mad ideas. It's your condition."

"Please go away," said Hester.

He remained where he was. "What is it? I want to know."

Hester gathered her forces. "I'll tell you," she said. "I am thinking something terrible about you. I don't know how to say it. If I am wrong, I don't see how you can forgive me. But you must. That child is your daughter."

John Oliver struggled for a fierce denial. Finally he protested weakly: "Because you've just discovered a silly resemblance."

"Tell me the truth, John. I can see it in your face. Isn't she your daughter?"

John Oliver gave up the struggle. Every day since he had known Hester he had ached to tell her everything. The unconfessed burden of sin weighed down his weak soul. Had she never discovered anything, he knew now that, sooner or later, he must himself have told her.

§ 3

He began to speak hurriedly, the words pouring forth unstemmed.

"She is. It's true. I'll tell you everything. I came to Lost Hope as clean as any man could be. The day I first saw you I could have spread out my life for the whole world to look at. I wish I had died that day. Or that you had never left Lost Hope. Hester, from that day to this, you have never been out of my mind."

"Not even"—Hester's throat was dry as she spoke, "not even the day your daughter was born."

He passed over the sarcasm.

"Not ever—any day. But then I was thrown on the usual digger life. You know what it is yourself. You warned me that day we met. And I had no luck. Except the first week. Not a 'colour.' Then the breakwater went in. The flood came months too early. We were all broken—every one of us. I was mad—you don't know the bad luck we had. For the first time I got drunk. I went on drinking on and off. But I never looked for—anything of the other kind. The girl—Maggie's mother—a coloured girl—

came to cook for me. That's how it happened. Then I sent her away. It was the day I got the snapshot you took of me. Why did you never write to me before? Why only when it was too late?"

"Go on," said Hester.

"Do you remember asking me at Muizenberg why the snapshot was torn? I tore it because it came too late. Then I stuck it together again." He paused before continuing. "The baby—Maggie—was born in the location. But afterwards she was ill and Annie brought her to my place. And Annie stayed on. I lived with her for eleven years."

Hester numbly recorded the fact on her consciousness. He had lived with a coloured woman for eleven years.

John Oliver went on relentlessly, his eyes on her pale face. The urge of confession was on him now, as in other days the urge of drink had driven him.

"There were three other children. The boy died last year."

The "bad sickness" Maggie had said. He stopped himself before telling Hester that detail, thrust it behind him, and proceeded:

"I lost all hope. I felt that nothing mattered. All the odds were against me. I gave up. I went to the dogs. Hester!" he cried suddenly, "I lost those eleven years out of my life. Isn't that enough? Must I lose all the rest with them? I've done whatever I could to be a different man.

Is nothing I can ever do now any use? Don't look at me like that. Hester, is it all finished? We were so happy."

He went on again, fighting for a word from her.

"I got my chance to free myself from Lost Hope when the War broke out. I won a commission. The men liked me. I was mentioned in despatches. Except that time in Kimberley—I have never been drunk again. I would give my life for you, Hester. Can't I do anything in the world to prove to you that I mean it?"

He grasped at his final hope.

"Hester, what about the child? It's my child, too. Can't you give me a chance as the father of your child?"

At that Hester's face flushed darkly.

"If I could forgive you everything else—that is the one thing I could never forgive. I hope I may die before I bear a child to you. I hope the child may die before it is born. I can never be clean again—never. You have degraded me to the level of that coloured woman. She and I have both borne you children."

"You are married to me," muttered John Oliver.

"That is the only difference."

He took a step forward. "This is all hypocrisy," he cried. "Did you think I was pure when you married me? Did you ever ask me? Did you, I say."

He put his hands out. The gesture was involuntarily dramatic. "You women forgive so

much. Is there a too much? Oh, Hester, hurt me, make me suffer, but give me a chance to win your forgiveness."

Hester did not answer. He waited while the room grew heavily silent. Then she said suddenly: "If I had lived for eleven years with a drunken Kaffir——"

He interrupted her with a cry.

"Would you forgive me?"

She paused. "You see, the idea is so revolting that you cannot bear me to say it even. Yet you yourself lived for eleven years with a drunken coloured woman."

"It's different," he whispered.

"Why? . . . Oh, but what is the use of talking. We can't change anything now."

He came towards her.

"No," she said.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"I shall leave you to-morrow," she answered.

"Leave me?" he stammered blankly. He had been prepared for the worst—but he had never dared to define the worst.

"What else?" she enquired coldly.

"Where will you go? What will you say? You can't leave me. It is my child, too. I won't let you."

"I don't want your assistance or your permission. As for the child—you may have it—when it comes. I am not anxious to keep it. And as regards where I'm going or what I shall say, I don't know yet. I shall probably go home, and if

people ask me, I believe I shall tell them the truth. . . . I am tired. Will you leave me now?"

As he hesitated, she sprang up in sudden reaction against the forced control she had kept on her nerves. Her eyes blazed, and her voice was startling loud: "Will you go, I say."

CHAPTER XXXIV

§ 1

Mr. Grant had one fine moment in his life. It happened on the day Hester walked into her old home and found Alma and her father having breakfast in the dining-room.

It was three days after Ruth's wedding, and the reaction after the excitement of the pending event was on them. They both looked tired and rather pale. They were reading the *Cape Times*—Mr. Grant the cables, Alma the back pages. The toast was on the table in the familiar toast-rack, and some of Alma's annually preserved orange marmalade stood at her elbow. From the kitchen Hester heard the tinkling of teacups and teaspoons. It reminded her that she had had hardly anything to eat since she had left Kimberley. The picture that she saw from the doorway in the second before they raised their eyes from their papers was one of peace and quiet—of a sweet, clean pathos.

They both sprang up together.

"Hester!"

Alma reached her first, had her arms around her.

Hester felt a weakness at her knees, and sat down. She was looking ill and unbeautiful. Her

dress, not too skilfully constructed at Steytler's Rush with Mrs. Benjamin's assistance, was not only unbecoming, but unsuitable. The skin of her pale face was coarse and she had dark shadows under her eyes. She moistened her lips. "My box is on the verandah," she said. She felt as if she were going to faint. "I'd like some tea," she added.

"Have a little wine," her father suggested. "It will hearten you."

"No, thanks. Tea."

The servant was just coming in with it, looking at Hester curiously. Alma gave her a cup. Both she and Mr. Grant sat down near Hester and watched her while she drank it.

"Did you come with this morning's train?" said Mr. Grant.

"Yes."

He wanted to ask her a question about her husband, but refrained instinctively.

Hester put down her cup and saucer with shaky deliberation.

"I've left my husband," she said.

Somehow they had expected it, and made no sign of surprise.

"When?" said Mr. Grant.

"About ten days ago."

"And where have you been since?"

"I stayed in Kimberley till after Ruth's wedding was over. I didn't want to disturb you all. Didn't you notice my wire congratulating her came from Kimberley?"

"Yes. But we didn't think it strange."

There was a silence. They were waiting for Hester to speak.

"I left my husband," she said at last, "because I discovered that he had been living with a coloured woman for eleven years and had had four coloured children."

"Oh, Hester!" said Alma, her voice numb with shock.

Mr. Grant stood up in speechless agitation, walked across the room and came back. Hester realised for the first time how little she knew her own father. What would he say? He was a man and all men were women's enemies. He put his arm round her shoulder.

"Don't tell us any more if you don't want to, Hessie (it was a name he had not called her for fifteen years). We are glad you have returned to us. Alma, take her to her old room, and make her comfortable."

Something swelled from Hester's heart to her throat.

Suddenly she broke into big, hard sobs.

§ 2

They got the whole story out of her later—the scene with John Oliver, the kindness of Mrs. Benjamin, the nightmare days in Kimberley and on the train, the hate and despair, that grew stronger all the time.

"I don't know why I don't kill myself," she said to Alma. "How else can I be free of him

while his child is getting life from my body. I sound," she added bitterly, "like a stage character, but that is how I feel. As if a vampire were sucking my blood."

"But it's your own child, too, Hester," Alma protested, horrified.

"I don't want it. And here it is dragging on my life. And forever. What shall I do when it is born? I hate it so. What do women do when they hate their own children?"

"You might not hate it afterwards."

"I know I shall."

Another time Alma said to her: "Hester, if you had never known about John's past, what then? Would you not have lived your life out happily?"

It was the argument John Oliver had used to himself as encouragement to Hester's ignorance.

"A man's past is part of him. I should have found out sooner or later. But what is the use of talking about ifs? I know now, and I can never un-know. Nor can I ever for a moment forget. I shall be tied for life to his child."

That was the way she constantly put it. "His child," as if she laid no personal claim to it herself.

In the days that followed Mr. Grant received a letter from John Oliver. He confessed the past, sought to extenuate it, begged for his father-in-law's assistance towards a reconciliation. He spoke, too, of making another attempt to be accepted for active service overseas, and added, "I

shall probably be killed there, or finished in some other way. Sooner or later every man is. All I want is her forgiveness before I go."

Mr. Grant put the letter before Hester. "What shall I do about it?" he asked her.

"As far as I am concerned, nothing. As far as you are concerned, anything you like."

Mr. Grant would not answer the letter.

§ 3

After the first spasm of generous welcome, a new difficulty presented itself to Mr. Grant. What would people say? How were they to account for Hester's presence in Cape Town? . . . He explained the difficulty to Hester.

"I'll go away if you prefer," she flared up. It took very little nowadays to set her on edge.

"My dear girl. You know I don't mean that at all," her father protested anxiously. "I am only wondering what we shall say about your being here."

"We need say nothing at all," said Hester. "No one will be rude enough to ask."

"They'll hint their questions," Alma pointed out.

"Then we can tell them the truth. I don't care."

"But we might care," said Alma with a little sternness. "It affects us too, you know."

The tears came to Hester's eyes. It was true. She was not the only one involved.

"Could we not say," Alma continued, gentle

again, "that you are staying with us while your husband is fighting in Europe? That sort of thing is done all over the world now, you know."

"And when he returns?"

"He might not return. And by the time the War is over, people will have lost their curiosity about you. There will be many fresher things for them to consider."

It seemed to Hester that there was a new strength, a new wisdom, in Alma.

"Let it be as you think best," she said humbly.

It was the first time in her life Hester had ever displayed any meekness.

§ 4

In due course friends and acquaintances—sensing something a little untoward in the circumstances of Hester's arrival at her old home—began to call, hoping for revelations. But Hester was nerved to duplicity. She answered calmly their questions about her husband.

"He is going to Europe to fight. . . . We have given up our home. . . . I don't quite know when he will be passing through Cape Town. It depends on his unit, of course. . . . Oh, life on the Diggings! It wasn't new to me, you know. . . . I can't say whether I shall return there. Things are so unsettled. One dare not discuss the future these days. . . ."

"Well, no one gets much food for gossip from you, Hester," Alma congratulated her.

"It's easy to deceive," said Hester grimly. "I

am becoming quite accustomed to my rôle of Spartan wife bravely speeding her husband to her country's service. I wonder how many people are staying at home reaping honour for allowing others to suffer."

"Don't be cynical, Hester."

"Why not? Isn't cynicism the humour of the hopeless and the courage of the desperate? And am I not hopeless and desperate enough? I think cynicism can be a great quality. It is the honesty of the sophisticated, and the truth so glaring that the weak-eyed are afraid to look at it. When I forget to be cynical, I am nothing but a crumpled heap of misery. Haven't you any imagination, Alma? Here have I to spend my days in sickness and ugliness to bear a child to this man the thought of whom revolts me. And here are these women sitting around with gaping ears hoping to hear about something unpleasant, while I try to induce them to believe that I am simply a loving wife nobly sacrificing her all at her country's need. I wonder if they believe me."

"They seemed to," Alma reassured her.

Hester looked at her with repentant eyes.

"Poor old Alma! Why should you be brought into contact with this sordidness? But it's only a few months. Then I'll go away and try and do something."

"And the child?"

"I'll get someone to look after it for me. I couldn't bear to live with John Oliver's child."

"But then—the talk again, Hester."

"What am I to do? Can I never live my own life any more? If there must be talk, I can't help it. I can only stave it off while I am with you. I make no promises about afterwards. Oh, Alma, try to understand. Isn't my freedom worth a little gossip?"

CHAPTER XXXV

§ 1

For a time after Hester's arrival things went sweetly. And then there began to grow gradually in Mr. Grant a feeling of irritability against his daughter. He struggled at first to overcome his mood, but soon gave way to it without much restriction.

He put it to himself resentfully that no one had compelled Hester to marry this fellow; that she had left a comfortable home to do so; and that now it was pretty hard lines on the rest of them that they should have to share with her the unsavoury aftermath of her marital choice.

Sometimes he went further, and wondered why, having made her bed, she couldn't lie on it. After all, whatever his past life, the man seemed to have treated her well enough. Generally Mr. Grant would be a little ashamed of this train of thought. But, occasionally when he was not feeling too well, he allowed it full vent, and showed Hester his mind by implication if not by direct word-of-mouth.

Once or twice there had almost been scenes between them which only the tact of Alma had averted. But soon the mere sight of Hester—morose and ungainly—was sufficient to arouse her father's slumbering hostility. She saw it, forced

herself to stolidity, and, as far as possible, to avoidance of him. . . .

It was when Mr. Grant spoke of Ruth that his attitude towards Hester became chiefly apparent. Consciously or unconsciously, he could not mention Ruth without suggesting to Hester that he was making mental comparisons between his two married daughters.

Once she said to him bluntly: "I know, father, that you are proud of Ruth and ashamed of me. You needn't rub it in. I would rather be in Ruth's position myself."

"My dear girl," he answered, surprised and a little sorry—"I didn't suggest anything like that, did I?"

"Yes, you did, father," Hester answered. "And I won't stand it."

Later, Alma came upon her packing her box while the tears ran down her face.

"Hester, what are you doing?" she cried. "Is it father? Don't mind him, dear. He doesn't mean anything. You know he's not very strong. And he's worried because he's lost money on shares. You're so plucky. Stand his little moods for all our sakes. It'll be over soon now."

Hester sat down on the bed, the tears flowing more quickly now.

"Alma . . . I want to be plucky. But I'm not. I'd like to hold up a proud head, but how can I? Let me go, Alma! It will be best."

"Where to? Oh, don't give up. I'm sure father's sorry if he's hurt your feelings. Stay

for my sake. It's so lonely here without you."

Hester forced a watery smile. "You don't mean it, Alma. But I like to hear you say so. Do you want all that packing to be wasted?" she added with a little shyness.

§ 2

Hester's son was born a few months later—a big healthy boy, who exercised his lung-power to the utmost, and almost drove his grandfather mad. Hester searched his little red face daily for resemblances. It seemed to her almost from the beginning that he favoured his father entirely, and, if it required anything further to defeat Nature in her attempt to attach Hester to the child, it was this undoubted likeness to John Oliver.

After the nurse had left, Alma used to spend hours over him— he was a source of constant interest and amusement to her. Hester would sit by watching apathetically.

"Where's your maternal instinct?" Alma would demand.

"Perhaps I have none."

"There is no such thing as not having any."

"How do you know?"

"I suppose it comes with the child."

"Even an unwanted child?"

"I should think so. It's an ordinary animal function—the mother instinct—isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps if it had been a girl—but this constant reminder of what I want to forget!"

"Aren't you drawn towards him unconsciously?" Alma asked with some curiosity.

"Sometimes," Hester confessed. "When I'm not thinking. But that's not often.

"Those moments are the instinctive moments."

"Perhaps you are right. But then, you see, I am a thinking being as well as an animal." . . .

But there was certainly no question of grandpaternal feelings with Mr. Grant. The baby frankly bored and annoyed him.

"Good God!" he would shout, "can't any one stop that noise? It's unbearable. I have to run out of my own house to escape it."

At night he would pound at Hester's door.

"For heaven's sake. . . . Can't you give him something to keep him quiet? Gripe-water or powders or something? I can't sleep."

"I'm sorry, father," Hester would answer. "I've tried everything. I'm awfully sorry."

"Sorry!" Mr. Grant would mutter to himself. "Sorry! You ought to be!"

§ 3

One day there was a ring at the door-bell, and Alma, going into the sitting-room, found John Oliver there. He was again in khaki, and looked healthy and sunburnt. He held out his hand, and Alma, who would have given anything for the courage to refuse it, took it.

"How is Hester?" he said, as they remained standing.

"Quite well, thank you."

There was an awkward pause.

"The baby——" John Oliver stumbled after a moment.

"The baby is well too."

"A boy or a girl?"

"A boy."

There was another pause.

Then John Oliver said: "I am leaving for Europe with the next draft. I should like to see Hester for a moment before I go. Would she see me, do you think?"

"I don't think so," said Alma coldly. "But I'll ask her if you like."

She came back in a moment.

"No." she said.

John Oliver paled. "I thought she wouldn't," he said. "But I want to see the child. That's mine to see if I like."

When his son was brought in, John Oliver looked at him curiously, and put his brown hand tentatively on the small red fist.

"Poor little chap," he said after a wistful examination. His mind went back involuntarily to other paternal experiences. He thought of Jimmy dying of the "bad sickness." That also had been his son.

"Poor little chap," he repeated. "What's his name?"

"Adrian Terblanche. After our grandfather."

"Who gave him the name?"

"It was my idea."

She took the child away, and returned to find

John Oliver standing where she had left him.

"Well, good-bye," he said, once more holding out his hand. "I won't trouble you again." After a moment he added lamely: "Tell Hester I'm sorry." He put a small roll of bank notes on the table. "I want her to use this for Adrian."

As Alma watched him leave she had to reinforce her heart with the recollection of his past life to prevent a small twinge of pity from entering there.

Hester was standing at her window when Alma joined her in the room.

She turned round with fierce eyes.

"I saw him from the window. He looks well, doesn't he? You would never say from his appearance that he had shared eleven years of his life with a drunken, coloured woman."

§ 4

When the baby was about four months old, Hester told her father that she had made up her mind to find some occupation. "I was thinking of nursing," she said. "There's room for nurses just now."

Her father agreed that it was a not unwise idea. "I'll try and find some place for baby," Hester went on. "In fact, I have heard of a good woman who would keep him quite reasonably. I think I can afford it. The money his—father left him and what I have of my own will see me through for some time. I didn't want his money, but I couldn't do anything so dramatic as tear up the

notes. I have to support the child somehow."

With the return of health Hester felt nerved to meet the world face to face again. She was looking better than ever in her life before—the matronly fulness suited her and she had a stronger colour.

"You have been very good to me, father," she added.

Mr. Grant's conscience pricked him as he remembered how often he had not been so very good to her.

"My dear," he said, "don't worry about the little money part. You are not fatherless. That will be all right."

Alma went still further. That night she said to Hester: "I quite understand your wanting to do something, Hester, and I think nursing is a good idea. But I have another idea as well."

"What?"

"Leave the baby here!"

"But, Alma——"

"I'd love to look after him. You know"—she hesitated—"I'm not likely to marry——"

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. And I have nothing to do, and I'm often lonely. Do leave him with me."

"Father would object."

"I don't think so. He's getting quite used to him now that he doesn't cry such a lot. I think I could persuade him to agree. Now don't say no, Hester. Let me lay up provision for the

future by bringing up a stalwart nephew to support my old maidenhood."

A little feeling very like jealousy shot through Hester. She did not want the child, yet Alma's jesting remark about appropriating her son against her own old age stirred the possessive instinct in her. Then she looked into Alma's sweet, tired, little face, and was ashamed to have owned the feeling.

"You are always too good to me, Alma," she said contritely. "I should like it very much if father had no objection."

"We can only ask him," said Alma.

Hester never knew the secret persuasion that went towards earning her father's consent. But when finally he gave it, he did so not ungraciously.

"My dear," he said, "I have long been wanting to experiment on the up-bringing of a man-child."

CHAPTER XXXVI

§ 1

One day—it was summer again now—Alma was sitting, with Adrian in his perambulator beside her, on the lawn under the old mulberry tree in front of the house. Her back was to the gate. But she heard the pausing of a man's footsteps, turned her head, and found herself facing René van Reede.

"May I come in?" he asked. There was obviously nothing for it but to consent.

He walked towards her. "I have passed here often," he said, "but I never had the courage to come in until you turned round just now and saw me." His eyes wandered curiously to the perambulator. "What's that?" he asked.

Something in his attitude amused Alma.

"It's Hester's baby," she informed him.

He caught the glint of amusement, smiled at her, and leant over the perambulator.

"Hullo, son!" he said. "Or is it a daughter? In any case, it's a sturdy little specimen and has more hair than I have. Where's Hester, by the way?"

"Nursing."

"And you're in charge of the offspring? Do you like it?"

"Quite."

"And where's his father—or is it "her" father? You haven't told me yet whether it's a boy or a girl."

"It's a boy. His father is fighting in Europe."

There was a pause. René had temporarily exhausted the baby as a topic of conversation, and was considering another opening.

"May I sit down on the grass?" he said, "Or would that be too careless and happy an attitude for me to take in your presence?"

"Won't you have a deck-chair?"

"No. I'd prefer the grass if you don't mind. Do you?"

"Why should I" asked Alma, feeling nevertheless that, as he had indicated, the position carried with it a certain familiarity.

He sat down at her feet, removed his hat, and gave a sigh of content.

"I haven't been so happy for years," he said. "Good Lord, what a piece of luck that you should have been sitting here just as I passed—and that you should allow me to sit with you. Or perhaps I oughtn't to say that?"

"You seem enthusiastic," Alma answered calmly.

"And are you done with enthusiasm yourself?"

"Don't you think we might avoid personal discussions?" Alma suggested.

"I hoped not," he replied simply. "I always find them very interesting. I was wondering if ever we met again whether you'd ask me how I

was getting on. Because I am anxious to tell you. Don't you think I look more respectable now than the last time we met? At least, I'm not ragged, am I?"

His naïveté embarrassed Alma. Apparently one could be nothing but intimate with this man. She had thought his frank simplicity a charming quality in the old days, but it angered her now.

"I haven't noticed," she said curtly.

And yet she had noticed. For he was decidedly improved. He looked more healthy, was better groomed. He had a ruddier tinge in his cheeks, and a less ruddy tinge in his nose and eyelids. His well-cut features had lost their pinched appearance.

He looked at her with his intent blue eyes.

"Snubbed!" he said. Then he changed his tone abruptly. "Look here, Alma, let us have it out. After all we know one another too well to have to pretend. Let us be honest with one another. I want to earn your friendship. Have I a chance of it?"

Alma sat silent under his direct gaze.

"What do you mean by friendship?" she said at last.

"I'll crush the definition within likely limits: A kind thought now and then. Permission to see you sometimes. Perhaps an occasional smile. Are these things too much to ask?"

Again Alma found herself at a loss for a reply.

"You put me in an awkward position," she said after another pause. "How can I tell now

what I am likely to think about you in the future? The only thing I am sure of is the past."

René considered the point. "You're right." . . . He sighed. "Well, let's bring it down to the narrowest limits. May I come and see you sometimes?"

"If you care to," Alma conceded.

"And bring my violin?"

"Yes."

"Then that's a bargain. Do you know, Alma, I haven't been to a single house in Cape Town since my return."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes I wasn't invited, and sometimes I didn't want to go. Many of the old college men are away fighting, and others are respectably married. And I have been out of our world too long, I suppose. But you haven't asked me yet what I am doing with myself."

"Are you still at the Novelty?"

"Yes. But I'm teaching the violin as well. And I have one or two pups."

"Pups?"

He laughed. "No, I haven't suddenly become a dog-fancier. I mean pupils. I coach them in classics. I advertised and they came. That was fairly enterprising, wasn't it?"

"Are you a good teacher?" Alma asked.

"If I'm not, they haven't found me out yet. I'm beginning to save money, you know. What do you think of that? . . . Hullo, the offspring is beginning to assert himself. Shall I lift him out?"

He sprang up, carefully removed the small noisy bundle from the perambulator, and sat down with it on the grass again.

The sight of the baby screaming loudly on René's awkward knees was too much for Alma's gravity. She laughed aloud. "Give him to me. He wants his bottle. I'll have to go to the house for it. Would you like some tea at the same time?"

"Would I?" said René. "I've been dying for tea the whole afternoon."

As Alma walked up the path René followed her with a look half-wistful, half-ironical. "Poor sweet, forgiving little Alma," he said to himself.

§ 2

Gradually René van Reede began to establish himself once more in a little niche in the Grant's scheme of life. At first Mr. Grant had been antagonistic.

"What is that fellow hanging around again for?" he demanded. "He drops us"—Mr. Grant used the plural pronoun because he had never yet awakened to the fact that René might have had a reason of the singular number for calling at his house—"he drops us completely for a dozen years, and suddenly he comes along with his 'here we are again' manner, as if he had only parted from us yesterday."

René was not unaware of Mr. Grant's attitude, and cast about for a weak spot through which to insinuate himself. He infallibly discovered it.

He asked Mr. Grant to teach him bridge, learnt the game rapidly—as he could learn anything when he chose, and in a little while had acquired the privilege of a casual dropper-in. Mr. Grant had no business in the world, except that of occasionally losing money on the share-market, and was ready for a game of double-dummy at any hour of the day. The night had to be excluded owing to René's occupation, but he had free hours most mornings, and on two afternoons during the week. On these occasions they were joined by a thin, middle-aged spinster who lived in a boarding-house near by, and who had a passion for cards altogether out of keeping with her puritanical appearance. In the old days Miss Templeman had taught both Alma and Hester mathematics at school. She was still teaching at the same school, was still as successful and unpopular as ever, and even more thin and querulous. She had a pink, wrinkled face, and a clear, staccato voice. Her short, snappy way of speaking and her thin-lipped, nervous smile marked her as forever trembling on the brink of an irritable break-down. But in all those years she had never overstepped that brink.

She was certainly the neatest person any of her pupils had ever seen, always stiff and erect and immaculate, coiffed to the last hair, correct to the last stitch. She looked, a girl had once said, as if her corset reached from her neck to her ankles.

It was with almost a shock that Alma had

found herself one day—about a year ago—waiting for a tram at the same stop as Miss Templeman. Although Alma was over thirty, she had never been able to shake off a feeling of nervous awe towards her old teachers. She could not treat them as belonging to the ordinary herd of mankind.

When Miss Templeman had asked her if she lived in the same street, she had answered in the respectful, embarrassed manner of a pupil to a teacher.

But after that they had met frequently, and one day Miss Templeman had asked Alma into her room. That was a step away from the old school atmosphere. A further step was taken when Alma invited Miss Templeman to return the visit. And then, all at once, Alma saw Miss Templeman as an ordinary human being, playing afternoon bridge with them at her father's suggestion, school and mathematics far away, her whole mind concentrated on the game of cards.

And so they would sit gravely into the summer twilight, a peculiarly assorted quartette, playing bridge, while Adrian slumbered peacefully in his perambulator on the verandah. As Alma's lack of skill generally upset her father's equilibrium, it soon became an understood arrangement that she should play with René, while Miss Templeman played with her father. Afterwards Friday afternoon was regularly set aside for bridge.

In thoughtful moments, Alma used to wonder at the workings of Fate. Hester had left her hus-

band and was learning to be a nurse. Hester's baby had become her—Alma's—charge. René who had casually dropped her from his life while the best years slipped by, and had just as casually married his landlady's daughter, was now sitting, a widower, playing cards with her as a partner, while Miss Templeman who had taught her mathematics seventeen years ago, was now amiably accepting her hospitality and discussing points of card-finesse with her father. In Johannesburg George, her admirer for more than a decade, was prospering exceedingly as Ruth's husband.

The retrospect left her a little wistful. Life was a strange thing, and although the years had dribbled themselves away marvellously soon in the past, they seemed to stretch interminably long before her in the future.

What, she asked herself, was the use of it all?

§ 3

The months were slipping past. In Europe men were dying daily by the thousand, but the world was hardened to the suffering of others, and the War, except for occasional spasms, had begun to be a little boring. People were inured to recruiting meetings, patriotic concerts and collection-boxes. South Africa was prosperous. Those who had lost mourned; but, insensibly, the gap between life and death had narrowed, and death was no longer sacred or important—indeed, one might say life was no longer sacred or important.

Nothing was quite as sacred or important as it had once been.

Mr. Grant had to a large extent lost his interest in the war-news, and was devoting a good deal of eagerness to his Friday bridge. His health was better than it had been for a long time, and he was, as Alma sometimes playfully suggested, becoming quite a dandy in his old age. Alma herself was given up to the care of Adrian, who had four teeth and was already crawling. Hester came over whenever she had an opportunity, quite professional already, and much happier than for some time past; and tried to induce her son to say "Mammie." He was a robust, broad-smiling boy and appreciated all the attention he could get.

CHAPTER XXXVII

§ 1

One evening at dinner there was a long pause in the conversation. And then Mr. Grant said to Alma: "Alma, I have news to tell you." Something in his tone caused Alma's heart to bound prophetically. She looked her enquiry.

Mr. Grant cleared his throat. Then he spoke suddenly: "I have asked Miss Templeman to marry me, and she has consented."

"Miss Templeman!" said Alma.

"It is a surprise to you?" remarked her father, slightly pleased, slightly ashamed.

"I had no idea!" Alma murmured.

There was an uncomfortable little silence. Mr. Grant broke it with a sharp "Well?"

"I don't know," answered Alma almost inaudibly.

"You're not pleased?" her father insisted.

"I remember mother so well."

Her father winced. "Your mother always wished for my happiness. I have been faithful to her memory for many years. She would not have liked me to be lonely in my old age."

"I am with you," said Alma.

"You might marry."

"It is not likely."

"Don't you consider the possibility at all?"

"Hardly."

Mr. Grant carved himself another piece of beef, offered Alma a second helping, and addressed himself for a time to his plate.

Alma tried to collect her thoughts. The idea of Miss Templeman as a stepmother was bewildering.

"Miss Templeman specially asked me to tell you," said Mr. Grant, "That she wished our—arrangement"—the word came quaintly after some mental searching—"to interfere in no way with the life you have always led. You will continue living here as before, and I am sure you and she will get on very well together."

"And Adrian?"

"We haven't considered the matter of Adrian yet," said Mr. Grant with a slight frown.

Alma looked at her father with curious eyes. She had thought herself done with the thrills of existence, but here this little grey old man was contemplating a new life; taking a fresh grip on the world. It struck her that her father was spending his time making love to Miss Templeman!

The idea of a man's making love to Miss Templeman whom, seventeen years ago, she had dreaded as a stern schoolmistress, hit Alma's sense of the ludicrous. But, again, the idea that that man was her father filled her with a sudden flood of contemptuous anger against both of them that sur-

prised her by its unaccustomed vehemence. She finished her coffee quickly, made an excuse, and went to her room.

§ 2

The next afternoon was a free afternoon for Hester. Mr. Grant was out with Miss Templeman, and had left it to Alma to tell her sister the news. Hester started aghast. "You're joking, Alma!" She pulled herself up. "No, you're not joking. I can see it's true. But father and Miss Templeman! Miss Templeman, Alma!"

"Isn't is horrible?"

"It's that absurd bridge of yours."

"I suppose so."

"Whatever induced you to get her for a fourth?"

"She lives in the boarding-house down the road, and I used to see quite a lot of her. I didn't know who else would come and play in the afternoon."

Alma's tones were apologetic. Hester shrugged her shoulders.

"It's the bridge that's done it, of course. You always say she plays such a good game. And father's mad about bridge. I suppose he expects life is going to be one long, sweet, double-dummy when he marries Miss Templeman."

Her indignation faded into a smile.

"I say, Alma, fancy father's idea of bliss!"

"You can see the humour of it better than I can Hester. You won't have to live with him."

Alma's face was drooping.

"That's true," said Hester. A thought struck her. "And Adrian, what about Adrian?"

"Father said they hadn't considered that part of it."

"Trust Miss Templeman to consider it," said Hester.

Alma's sense of justice intervened.

"Aren't we rather hard on her perhaps?"

"Well, she deserves it. Why do you think she's marrying father? You don't suppose she's in love with him, do you?"

"But she's getting old, and she has had a hard life, and perhaps she just wants a little comfort and security in her old age. Don't you remember, Hester, how you used always to say to me that it was better to be married without love than never to be married at all? I expect that's the way Miss Templeman feels."

Hester's eyes narrowed.

"I've been married myself since then, and I've changed my mind. You'll never know, Alma, how I envy you your possession of yourself. . . . Well, that's over. . . . Tell me, what did Miss Templeman say to you?"

"She kissed me, and said she'd always loved me, and hoped we'd all be happy together."

"She didn't mention Adrian?"

"Not a word."

"I think I'd better take him away," said Hester meditatively.

"Oh, Hester!" pleaded Alma. "I'd miss him dreadfully."

"But I might be forced to," said Hester.

§ 3

For all her defence of Miss Templeman's motives to Hester, her father's engagement began to irritate Alma. Her father as a lover struck her as rather a ridiculous little object. She disliked the way he pronounced Miss Templeman's name—"Clara"—with a widening of the vowels. She herself now never called Miss Templeman by any name at all. As far as was conformable with the standards of politeness she avoided addressing her future step-mother. . . .

And she was no less irritated by Miss Templeman's continual references to her father as "Theo," and by her assumption of authority over him. Miss Templeman was now an almost daily visitor at the house, and already—probably quite unconsciously—regarded herself as its mistress. Her manner towards Alma was half-patronising, half-anxious, and she could not resist giving her constant advice.

Alma admitted to herself that she was getting "nerves."

They were married in July, and went to Johannesburg for the honeymoon, leaving Alma at home with Adrian, who was still an unsettled question. From there they wrote letters expressive of their enjoyment of their holiday, with repeated references to George and Ruth (who apparently did not resent the new step-mother) and enthusiastic descriptions of their home and way of living. . . . The letters failed to cheer Alma.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

§ 1

Mr. and Mrs. Grant were back, and Mrs. Grant had assumed control as mistress of the home. She was a thorough and conscientious manager, and was delighted to be able at last to put into practice the theories of years.

It had always been her idea that an untrained intelligent woman ought to be able to manage a home as well as a trained unintelligent woman, and she now proceeded to demonstrate the fact. She was chiefly anxious to show Mr. Grant how efficient and economical she could be. Most mealtimes were devoted to discussions of the prices of things, tales of thrifty manœuvres and boasts of triumphant marketings.

Alma often wondered how an intelligent woman found it worth while to devote her brains to these smallest of small things. Her stepmother sensed the unvoiced criticism and defended herself. "It's our national duty to be economical."

Alma said nothing, but felt that patriotism played little part in Mrs. Grant's scheme of existence. Natural penuriousness, combined with a life-time of narrow means, had spoilt her financial perspective—she would never rid herself of the habit of thinking in pennies.

There were, indeed, times when Mrs. Grant herself craved the generous hand—wished that, like some people, she might be able to spend money without thinking of it. That was the trouble with her. She could not prevent herself from thinking about money. It worried her. An over-payment or an unnecessary expenditure lay on her brain, kept her awake at night, obtruded itself upon her happiness by day. She was one of those women who bought the article that "would do just as well." She spent endless time mending and darning what had got beyond the stage of mending and darning. She was a great user-up of remnants, whether of food or clothing

On the question of food, there had been something approaching an altercation between her and Alma. The new Mrs. Grant believed in the stock-pot - joint - twice - a - week - and - made - up-dishes system of living.

A straight liberal diet was the tradition in the Grant family. Soup had to be made fresh every day, cunning disguises of left-over food were taboo.

"You must have managed very extravagantly before I came," said Mrs. Grant to Alma.

Alma flushed up. "Do you think so?" she said in a voice of still anger.

"Yes. I certainly do. Wastefully, in fact."

"But comfortably, at any rate," Alma returned.

"Am I making you uncomfortable now?" Mrs. Grant asked, her eyes cold and hard.

Alma was slightly intimidated.

"No, of course not. But, made-up dishes don't agree with father."

"That's only fancy."

"He has been complaining of indigestion lately."

By a coincidence Mr. Grant that same evening brought the subject up.

"You know, Clara, my dear, I fancy that this stew will rather upset me. As a matter of fact, I don't really care for stews and that sort of thing. I prefer an honest joint, or else a grill or poultry."

Mrs. Grant glared at Alma, over whose face a shade of demure triumph flitted, in spite of efforts at suppression.

"I suppose this is Alma's idea," she said.

"Alma's idea?" echoed Mr. Grant.

"We were duscussing the question only this morning."

"I assure you, my dear Clara, she has not mentioned the matter to me. I look at it this way. I am getting on in years. One pleasure after another is dropping behind me. I can still enjoy a good dinner. And I can afford it. So why shouldn't I have it?"

His point of view seemed unanswerable, and Mrs. Grant contented herself with an angry glance at Alma by way of retort.

But that night her conscience troubled her. Had she been wrong after all? And was there not something to be said for her husband's way of thinking? As he had justly put it, the joys of

age were limited. Why could she not bring herself to grasp them without considering the cost? Why not get what satisfaction she could out of the money she had?

She recalled a small scene which had stuck in her memory for years. She and an elderly gentleman, grey-haired and red-faced, were getting into a train. The porter handed her her luggage, and, with a mental reservation to the effect that porters were paid by the railway for their work and had no right to mulct the public she gave him threepence by way of tip.

The same porter also assisted the elderly gentleman. Presently she saw him plunge his hand into his pocket and pull out a handful of money—she was almost certain she saw a golden half-sovereign in the miscellaneous collection—give it to the porter, and then turn indifferently away to read his evening paper.

She had never discovered who the elderly gentleman was nor ever again seen him. It was, she often told herself, the grossest piece of careless wastefulness possible. Nevertheless there were times when she felt a certain largeness in the act which she would have given anything to be able to emulate.

But in her heart she knew quite well that if she possessed millions she could not give, without counting, an indiscriminate handful of money to anyone in the world. That was the point. She might give—granted the appropriate occasion. But she could not give without counting.

Her mind travelled back to Alma. She and Alma were not getting on as well as she had expected. Perhaps it was her own fault. There was a core of hardness in her which had all her life stood between her and love. She had never been popular at school. She knew it. But knew too that just as she could not give money without counting, so her better nature could not assert itself on impulse. On deliberation perhaps, but not without a calculating of costs. Perhaps, she thought, it was her mathematical spirit.

She determined to make an effort towards friendlier relations with Alma.

§ 2

Friday bridge was still the rule. Punctually at three o'clock René would ring the bell and walk into the dining-room, where, at a little table in the bay-window, they played.

Then one day Alma asked him curiously if he really enjoyed cards. The question was an idle one, but it had its consequences. René's wisdom fell before it.

"Sometimes," he answered, "when I'm in the mood. But, of course, it's such a splendid excuse."

"Excuse for what?"

"Why, to come here. Don't you notice that I am calling on you nowadays? You didn't think —did you?—I could be so persistently regular for the sake of a game of cards. I'll tell you a secret.

I gave up a pupil because I didn't want to lose my Friday afternoons with you."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Haven't I been warned rather to lose the whole world than my soul? My soul would die of inanition if it weren't fed occasionally by the sight of you."

"Please don't say these things."

"I must sometimes."

"I don't care to hear them."

"Don't you believe me?"

"I don't know."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Not face to face."

"How then?"

"Spirit to spirit. That's worse. I don't trust you, René."

René's nostrils quivered.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

"And nothing I can do will make you trust me?"

Against the voice in her heart Alma shook her head.

"Then what's the use of it all?" said René.

And next Friday morning a note arrived for Mr. Grant regretting René's "inability to come for the usual pleasant game owing to pressure of work."

Alma felt the blood rise to her face.

"What a nuisance," said Mrs. Grant, "what shall we do about a fourth?"

But no fourth was available at short notice and the day's game was abandoned.

Nor did René come the following Friday nor the Friday after that. "I need not have insulted him," thought Alma, and admitted to herself that she too "regretted his inability to come."

In these days Alma had to fortify herself with recurrent memories against her weakness of forgiving . . . But with constant repetition the memories began to grow less poignant, the offence they recalled to seem less heinous, the whole affair to be less important. "We were children," she told herself. "We were not definitely bound. He thought he loved me. Can I blame him for discovering that he could live without me? I was free to marry some one else if I chose. Once or twice I nearly did. . . . He had been down enough. Now that he is struggling against the world, should I refuse him a hand?"

She determined that when he came again she would treat him differently. The weeks passed. But apparently he had decided not to come again. Several times she began tentative notes to him. They were not sent because she did not know what to write in them. She could not blind herself to the fact that the mere sending of a note would be a tacit invitation to René to bridge the years between the past and the present, and retrace them together with her.

And, on top of it all, she still did not trust him.

§ 3

For some time relations between Mrs. Grant and Alma had been pleasanter. Mrs. Grant had made

a strong effort to gain her step-daughter's affection, and Alma, ever easy to win over, had responded.

Nevertheless, there were times when she could not but resent the subordinate position she now held in her father's house. And for all Mrs. Grant's efforts to live—and let live—generously, there was still that weighing look in her eyes, that calculating note in her voice. The tree might be lopped of its branches, but its roots were deep in the soil. Mrs. Grant always considered the things Alma bought too dear and obviously—if unspokenly—wondered whether she did not spend too much on her clothes. And there was still the unsolved problem of Adrian. He was a noisy boy (Mrs. Grant hated noise); and he was not only an unnecessary source of expense but also, naturally, a fount of petty troubles. He had not "taken" to Mrs. Grant, screamed when she approached him, and contrived generally to make himself quite unattractive and unwelcome to his step-grandmother.

CHAPTER XXXIX

§ 1

George Buckle put down the letter from Alma that Ruth had given him to read. "It appears to me," he said, "that Alma isn't getting on too well with your step-mother."

"It struck me, too," said Ruth. "And she seems upset at her refusing to allow Adrian to remain on. I wonder how Hester will manage to keep him somewhere else."

"She might get a separation allowance," George suggested.

Ruth shook her head. "Hester wouldn't do that. But I certainly think father ought to help her. Poor old Hester! She has messed up her life, hasn't she? And Alma, too. What on earth induced father to marry again?"

"His wife, I suppose," elucidated George.

"Oh, well, of course. But surely he was comfortable enough with Alma."

George allowed a few minutes to pass without offering any further remark, his eyes down, a puckering between his light eyebrows. Then he looked up at his wife.

"Ruth, ought we not to ask Alma up here?"

"What, to live?" said Ruth, startled.

"Well, I have only just thought of it. We might ask her up—you know, in general. I mean

indefinitely. If it works, she can remain on. If it doesn't, she has spent a holiday with us and returns home. And nothing further is said."

Ruth darkened. What did George mean? The smouldering jealousy in her shot out a little flame.

"Any permanent arrangement requires consideration, don't you think, George?"

"Naturally. But in the meantime we certainly ought to ask her to visit us. You will enjoy it too, won't you?"

He took up a paper, settled himself broadly in the Morris chair near the window, and left the matter in Ruth's keeping.

Ruth looked at him wonderingly. Did the thought of Alma cause him so little embarrassment that he could view in a purely fraternal spirit the prospect of her permanent residence with them? Either he was very sure of the complete passing away of the old love, or else he was recklessly anxious to see Alma again.

She watched him calmly reading the paper. Recklessness in connection with George seemed an unimaginable quality.

§ 2

And so one spring day Alma arrived in Johannesburg. Ruth and George were waiting for her on the crowded, ugly platform. They were both a little stouter, a little more set. They looked contented and prosperous.

Ruth kissed her. "Well, Alma?" said George as he shook hands.

"Well, George?" Alma returned.

"Give me your luggage-ticket," he said. "I'll be back in a minute. Or I'll tell you. Let Ruth drive you home in the car. I'll send the luggage on. You're looking awfully fit. How do you think I'm treating Ruth?"

"She looks splendid."

"Yes, doesn't she?" he beamed.

Pride sat visibly on Ruth as she led Alma to the car. She was well-dressed, carried herself with an air, exuded metropolitanism. As they drove along she talked to Alma of Johannesburg in the characteristic manner of the Johannesburger—a manner which suggests cheerfully that Johannesburg is the wickedest town under the sun, but delightfully interesting.

"It's an extraordinary place," Ruth declaimed with enthusiasm. "But I do like it. Johannesburg gives everyone his chance—it doesn't matter what he is or what he has, or what he's done."

"I like the air," said Alma.

"It's like champagne," Ruth asserted.

She asked Alma questions about Cape Town and Hester and the baby and Miss Templeman. "I can't think of her otherwise than as Miss Templeman, can you?"

"They're all well."

"How do you get on with her?"

"So—so."

"Poor Alma! It's rotten for you."

A tall young Zulu was in the garden as they drove up. He wore short white trousers, banded

with red, and a tunic also banded with red. His strong black legs were bare and shiny. He relieved them of their small parcels, and the sisters walked up to the house.

It was a house—Alma saw at once—such as she had always dreamt of. Creamy white with dark green woodwork and wide verandahs. Inside too it followed her vision. And no wonder. She had often enough told Ruth and George about her ideal house.

"Do you like it?" said Ruth.

Alma nodded silently. Did she like it! Why, it was her creation! And might have been her possession. But nothing was hers—no soul in the world, no corner in the world. She felt bare and stripped to the heart as she followed Ruth to her room. After all, the house might be only brick and plaster, but it was significant of more elusive things.

§ 3

At lunch-time George came in. Ruth met him with a conjugal kiss, and he sat down, with a householder's dignity, in his chair at the head of the table. He was still as fair as ever, but, with maturity, his freckles were no longer prominent as they once had been; and his face had settled into stronger lines. His features, which had always been good, now claimed the attention, that, surrounded in youth by his round, freckled cheeks, they had never received. And, seated, his broad, short figure showed at its best.

Alma looked at him, and wondered that she had once thought his appearance unattractive.

"What do you think of our Johannesburg, Alma?" he enquired with a smile.

"Ruth has been talking to me about it all morning."

"Ruth! She's a ferocious Randite. She likes our wickedness, and our extravagance and our dust and our Jews and all the other things that make Johannesburg what it is. Don't you, Ruth?"

"He's teasing me because I always say the Jews are the most interesting part of Johannesburg."

"Do you know any?"

"Crowds. This isn't Cape Town. You can't live here and not know Jews. They are Johannesburg, I think. You'll meet enough while you're here."

The end of her sentence caused George to look at her. Did she mean anything by the finite "while you're here."

His eye passed to Alma. How she had changed! How thin her throat was! Once Ruth had been as a copy of Alma. To-day Alma was as a shadow of Ruth. Her sweet smile was wistful. Her light, pretty voice carried a note of pathos. How he had worshipped her, and now she was nothing to him but a fine needle drilling a thin pain through his heart. He sat unconsciously musing. Ruth's clear-cut voice assailed his silence. "Wake up, George." His eyes sprang to

meet her with the reciprocity of the happily mated.

Alma caught the look.

"They are happy," she told herself. "Would I have been happy married to George?"

§ 4

Ruth was exerting herself as a hostess, exhibiting Johannesburg and her own place in it; and Alma was caught up in a whirl of gaiety. She found Johannesburg a determinedly pleasure-loving city. It made a joyous function of everything —of a third-rate play, of a card-evening, a bioscope, a cup of tea in town, an ordinary shopping expedition. The women dressed well and dressed always. They went shopping in excellent clothes in order to buy more excellent clothes. They lived luxuriously—the best of everything was barely good enough. Entertainment was lavish—the gastronomic range was exhaustively exploited.

The lower middle-class of Johannesburg had nothing to learn of the amenities of existence from the blue blood of ancient Europe.

In this fourth year of war-attenuation Johannesburg was spreading itself. If there were sufferers they hid unnoticed with their grief in dark corners. The Johannesburg that brightly flaunted itself was a pagan city of gaiety and extravagance. That was the very word for it—pagan—the sombre religions of pain and prayer were lying in the red dust, cast-off, grey and crumbling.

Once Alma said to Ruth, "What makes Johannesburg different from any other place?"

"The Jews, of course," said Ruth. "They're so prominent here, and they believe in cheerful living."

They were indeed, Alma soon noticed, prominent. It was the eve of the big Jewish holidays—the New Year and Day of Atonement. And the shops thrust forth their goods boldly in shop windows and newspaper advertisement. "For the Jewish Holidays."

Sartorially it was the busiest season of the year. No Jewess so poor but she must exhibit herself handsomely dressed for her yearly appearance at the Synagogue; no Jew so indifferent but he required his wardrobe replenished for the same function.

On the holidays themselves Ruth and Alma went into the town and found it quiet and deserted.

"You see," said Ruth, "it's the Jews. When they're away at their Synagogues, look how dead everything is. No jolly, well-dressed women; just a few quiet, grey things going about on their uninteresting business. If it weren't for the Jews the Johannesburg we know would simply not exist. That's why we have to consider them."

And considered they certainly were. The newspapers played up to them. The bioscopes often produced exclusively Jewish films. The Gentile almost—almost—made a friend of the Jew.

"Still there's something different, you know," said Ruth. "I like them and all that, but I can't

forget that we are not the same. I wonder why. It's not religion. Religion nowadays does not worry anyone. It's just something in the blood, I suppose."

Shortly after Alma's arrival, two Jewish girls called on her. They were fair and pretty, exquisitely dressed, talked well, and played the piano brilliantly. They were cultured and intelligent.

"They make me feel quite insignificant," Alma said to Ruth afterwards. "There's not a point in which they aren't superior to me."

"And yet I have an idea there are moments when they feel that you're superior. They told me one day—they're very frank, you know—that they can't always get away from a feeling of awkwardness with us."

"I suppose these girls are well-to-do."

"That's just it, they're not. But they have a knack for clothes and they squeeze a lot out of life. I honestly don't know how they manage it. They go everywhere and they see everything. . . . You'd be surprised if you met their old people, Alma. Russian Jews—quite ignorant and uneducated and common. Johannesburg's full of this sort of thing. It's quite wonderful."

§ 4

The great idea in Johannesburg seemed to be that one must not think. It was wiser not to think. If one thought too deeply one might realise the war. So one had jolly, interesting functions in aid of funds, and one sat on some com-

mittee or other, and subscribed to various charities —made of the war a new pastime in life, and went one's way complacently and cheerfully. If one were asked one's views about the war, one said lightly: "It's terrible. But we have to see it through." And one did not know that one said it lightly.

Every day at lunch-time, in front of the Town Hall, ineffective but persistent men shouted ineffective but persistent recruiting speeches. There were self-elected recruiting committees; indeed, self-elected committees of all kinds, which one accepted amiably because it was the easiest thing to do.

Very often George used to inveigh against the system of public life in Johannesburg, and Ruth would echo his criticisms. One day Alma said: "But why don't you do something or say something publicly? What is the use of you two sitting here and telling one another how bad things are, when you both know and agree they are bad?"

"He ought to stand for something," said Ruth. "I always tell him so."

"Perhaps I ought," said George. "But public life doesn't attract me just now. I've thought of it though."

"You've said that for a year," commented Ruth.

"Well, next time I'm approached."

"Have you been approached before?" Alma asked, respect tinging her voice.

"Oh, often," answered Ruth for him with pride.

So George was a man esteemed by his fellows!

Alma's thoughts sprang to René. Would anyone ever dream of "approaching" René?

"George is ambitious," Ruth added.

"I don't know about being ambitious," said George quietly. "There's no greatness in public life these days. But I'd like to sweep a little of the dirt out of things as they are. I'd like to try anyhow."

And as Alma looked at him, she felt that what he would like to try, he probably could do.

CHAPTER XL

§ 1

"Dear Alma," wrote Hester. "As I prophesied, I have had to take Adrian away. I can hardly blame Miss Templeman" (they almost invariably spoke of their stepmother by her maiden name) "for not liking to keep him, but it makes things very awkward for me. Lately, however, I have been receiving my husband's separation allowance. I am using it on Adrian's behalf. I ought to be too proud to accept it, but I can't afford to be proud. I hope you are having a good time. From what you tell me Ruth must be a lucky little soul. Good old George! I am grateful to him for making one of us, at any rate, happy. . . ."

The letter ambled on in the way of family letters. And there was a postscript to it. "Why don't you settle in Johannesburg?"

Settle in Johannesburg! As if the matter were of her own volition! What was she but an appendage that dangled helplessly behind her patron?

Yet life in Johannesburg was pleasant. At moments Ruth was still the little Ruth of the old days, and if, at other times, she wore the superior air of the matron, she wore it not disagreeably. And George was the soul of kindness and consid-

eration. Life here was altogether a more generous—a wider—thing. There were no hard economies. The people were broad and tolerant—dwelt as lightly on the faults of others as on their own faults. They looked on life, not as a trial, but as an enjoyment.

And if now and then there came to her a throb of regret for the might-have-beens she stilled it stoically. "Who am I," she asked herself, "that I should have everything I want, and that I should want more than I have? What have I ever done for anyone? What have I ever done for myself?"

The holiday was improving her health and appearance. The exhilarating air was putting tone into her spirit.

If one did not think, one could be quite reasonably happy in Johannesburg.

§ 2

They were sitting idly on the verandah with some magazines. "It's lovely having you here, Alma," said Ruth impulsively. "I wish you lived here."

"I wish it, too," said Alma.

"Then do," . . . said George.

And so the matter was settled.

Alma wrote to her father of her intention. The letter he wrote back was acquiescent and a little plaintive. Apparently he was finding the path he had chosen with his life-companion a little rough. . . .

And the months passed. At first Alma had

taken as her part in the housekeeping the care of the garden. There was a well and nearly an acre of ground, and she lavished her time like a spendthrift on cultivating her domain. But gradually, too, the housekeeping fell under her hands. Ruth had the gift of laziness. She could pass a whole day quite agreeably doing nothing at all. On the other hand, Alma was a born housekeeper. Insensibly each found her vocation. Ruth, in these days, was merely the charming nominal mistress of her home. Alma made the home.

Their little world accepted Miss Grant as an essential part of the Buckle ménage. In her small, quiet way she became very popular. She had lost the lure of first youth, but she had acquired the charm of understanding. She was sympathetic. People liked to tell her things. She gave herself spiritually and made no demands in return. Her position saved her from the enviousness of others. Everyone could afford to approve of her. She generally accompanied her sister and brother-in-law wherever they went, and was soon a part of the almost cosmopolitan little world they lived in.

She found herself with them one night at the house of George's solicitor. He was a Jew, and George considered him the smartest attorney in Johannesburg, and thus in South Africa. On the other hand, George, in his position as a man who, among other activities controlled the Johannesburg offices of two fire insurance companies, was one of Mr. Lewis's most valued clients; and Mr. Lewis's manner to George eloquently testified to

the fact that litigation about fire insurance is a very lucrative branch of a Johannesburg attorney's business.

But George was not the only client present. There was, in fact, a very heterogeneous mixture of people flooding the rooms. Most of them were Jews—wholesale merchants or wealthy concession-storekeepers on the mines. A good many of them spoke English very imperfectly. There were also present some professional friends of Mr. Lewis's,—several attorneys and two or three barristers.

There were four bridge tables and two poker tables—a strong set of bridge for men where the play was ten shillings a hundred; a weaker set where the men played at a shilling a hundred; a set for women at the same rate of play; and a mixed set where the stakes were a modest sixpence a hundred.

But the chief part of the card evening was the poker section. There were two tables at each of which sat, respectively, six women and six men. They played with chips representing five pounds, a pound, ten shillings and a shilling. The women gambled on very slightly lower terms than the men. They were all middle-aged, married women. They played with furious calm, "squeezing" their five cards close, one below the other, as they held them in their hands. Quite probably a few of them were out to lose the month's housekeeping money. At the men's table anything in the neighbourhood of a hundred pounds might pass from

one pocket to another as a result of the evening's play. At this table Mr. Lewis himself was playing. His wife, beautifully and expensively dressed, superintended the comfort of her guests and took no part in the games.

The Buckles were playing bridge—George in the ten shilling set, Ruth in the mixed set. Alma had pleaded her utter incompetence and was sitting in an easy chair watching Ruth's cards. Occasionally her hostess came and sat beside her, but most of Mrs. Lewis's time was spent in unobtrusive manipulation of the refreshments. . . . There were expensive sweets on all the tables, and cigars and cigarettes on the men's tables. Cold drinks of all kinds were being handed around constantly. There were ice-creams of two kinds and strawberries and cream. Later on tea and coffee were brought in with several kinds of cake, and four or five different kinds of sandwiches—caviare, smoked salmon, anchovy, nut and vegetable sandwiches, strengthening temptation with salted almonds and olives. And then there were liqueurs and whiskies.

Alma found herself thinking about the men in the trenches, but to her great self-content could not on that account resist the sandwiches.

At about half-past nine Mrs. Lewis brought a man round to Alma whom she introduced to her as Mr. Garnett. He could not play cards and had got tired watching the poker play, and Mrs. Lewis was dutifully pairing them off.

Mr. Garnett was a big man, approaching middle-

age, brown-skinned, blunt-featured and jovial, whom Alma immediately disliked. But she could not be anything except pleasant, and Mr. Garnett propelled the conversation along cheerfully, satisfied that he was making an excellent impression. He told Alma that he was a mealie-broker, that he had made a fortune out of mealies during the last two years, and that he had just, by way of a side-line, carried off a good thing in petrol. He was greatly absorbed in his activities, and they seemed to him the most obviously interesting things to discuss with other people. Fortunately, all he required of his audience was an occasional smile or interjection, and even when these failed Alma he was too intoxicated with his subject to observe the fact.

As he bade her good-night he said, "Will you be at home next Thursday?"

"I'm staying with my sister," she replied. "My movements rather depend on her. So I can't tell you."

She looked appealingly at Ruth for succour. But Ruth failed her deliberately. "Oh, yes. We'll be in," she said with great readiness.

§ 3

That was the beginning of trouble. In a very short time Mr. Garnett had assumed the attitude of a suitor. The combination of Alma and himself seemed to him "the very thing."

To Ruth also the arrangement appealed. Mr.

Garnett was rich, and just, she considered, the right age. She thought Alma ought to encourage him. She said so to George. But George, with an unexpected twinge of jealousy, protested warmly that Alma should not think of it. The warmth annoyed Ruth. There were arguments between the two when they went to bed, protestations, silences.

"Why shouldn't she marry him?" said Ruth. "She doesn't want to live on someone else all her life."

"Is that the way you look at it?" said George.

Ruth flamed up. "If you are so particular about whom she marries," she cried, "why didn't you marry her yourself?"

She was sorry the moment she said it. And, as before, on their honeymoon, when she had spoken in the same terms, George answered quietly: "Because she wouldn't marry me."

"And now you're sorry," sobbed Ruth. "Even now you care for her more than for me."

"Perhaps, if you are so uncontrollably jealous, you had better ask her to leave us," said George.

"Do you deny it?" Ruth demanded. "Do you deny that you still love her?"

The core of hardness that was in George met his wife's attack bluntly.

"I don't deny it," he said with the cold anger of the placid, self-contained man. And wondered as he said it whether it might not be true.

But he heard her crying in the dark.

"Ruth," he whispered, "little sweetheart, I didn't mean it. You angered me. You know it's not true."

She did not answer. He listened for her sobs, and, listening, in his tiredness, fell asleep.

In the morning Ruth met him, brightly cool.

"I am going to ask Alma to leave. Whether what you said is true or not doesn't matter. While she is here I am a cypher in my own house. We are happier without her."

"As you like," said George calmly.

But at breakfast-time Alma met her sister's gaze so clearly, so sweetly, that, visibly even to George, her resolution faded and died away.

For the time being, at any rate, there would be no asking Alma to go away. The meal went by, perhaps a little silently, but certainly not abnormally.

Afterwards as he rose from the table, George made a small motion with his head in the direction of Ruth. She met it blankly and he was not sure whether she had noticed it or not. But as he took his hat from the hall-stand, she walked casually towards the front door. He caught her as she passed and put his arm about her shoulder.

"You little silliest!" he whispered, and Ruth felt that heaven had not been ransacked in vain for endearments.

§ 4

Nevertheless there was a seed sown that matured under the dark earth and began to thrust its

sprouts above ground. Characteristically Ruth found it easier to forgive her husband's anger than her sister's innocence.

She began to cast about for ways to prove to George her superiority over Alma. Mentally and physically she clothed herself in attractive garb. She had never been so pretty, never so bright and gay. Alma, walking drably beside her, admired her heartily. "You're blossoming, Ruth," she said. And Ruth was much pleased and a little contrite. But not too contrite for a little score now and then off Alma. At which Alma would flush and remain silent; and at which Ruth would lie awake for hours in the night hating and despising herself, and thinking out ways of repentance.

Alma felt that there was trouble in the air—but she could not define its relation to herself. There was something intangibly wrong about Ruth's attitude—was it a suggestion of hostility? Something wrong too about George's punctilious courtesy—was it a shade too deliberate?

Or perhaps it was imagination on her part. She went about with her scissors among the rose bushes, puzzled and frightened. What if she were to lose this home? Would she have to return to that other home which had ceased to be a home? Would she be thrown on the world to create her own desolate counterfeit of a home?

And then there was the question of Mr. Garnett. She could not bring herself to like Mr. Garnett. Possibly he was a good business man and understood the mealie-market. Certainly he had made

money. But he was coarse-grained, lacked the finer susceptibilities, the delicacies of apprehension. One was forever explaining things to him. And while one explained and his mind strove with difficulty to follow the explanation, his eyes seemed to lose self-control and acquired a slight cast. He had large limbs, a large, too ready, laugh, a large appetite. He preferred jokes to humour, knock-about turns to drama, and prided himself on a total tone-deafness. He used to brag enthusiastically about his inability to distinguish one tune from another, and one rather gathered from his remarks that he considered music—Art generally—an effeminate pursuit. And fiction reading he regarded as a waste of time. "What a man wants to know is facts. Give me the facts, and for all I care you can make a bonfire of the novels."

Now lately, in defiance of George, Ruth had taken to pairing him off quite markedly with Alma. She enlarged upon his wealth, his business ability, his goodness of heart. Alma listened to her in apparent obliviousness of the underlying intention.

But one day, as they were having afternoon tea on the verandah, she said in her quiet, unexpected way: "Do you want to get rid of me, Ruth? Is that why I'm hearing so much of Mr. Garnett lately?"

"Why, Alma, don't you like him? Couldn't you consider him?"

"If you were not married to George would you consider him yourself?"

Ruth was an honest soul, and remained silent.

"Of course, you wouldn't. Is it because of the eight years' difference in our ages that you think I should be less fastidious?"

"Don't you want to be settled?"

"Yes. But not that way. And, if you will forgive my saying so, Ruth, not through your assistance."

That night at dinner George looked at his sister-in-law with a quick, curious glance. Her features appeared swollen and were unduly powdered.

"Well, girls, we'll go to a show to-night," he declared briskly. "If that chap Garnett doesn't turn up, that is. We don't seem to be able to get away from him lately."

His eyes met his wife's innocently and read the truth.

Ruth braced herself for the inevitable marital discussion that should follow the evening's amusement. It took the form of a curt announcement. George said: "This sort of thing can't go on any longer, Ruth. I shall speak to Alma myself to-morrow. Don't make any explanations now. Good-night."

§ 5

At seven o'clock next morning Alma, among her roses, spraying the aphides on the buds, was hailed by George.

"Can you spare me a minute, Alma?"

"Of course, what is it?"

"About this man Garnett."

"Oh, George!"

"My dear girl, it's all right. Don't worry. Come and sit down here, and let us have it out."

They sat down together on the cool grass. "We have been friends a long time, Alma," said George slowly. "And brother and sister for a shorter time. Can't we be frank with one another?"

"Please let us."

"Don't you want to marry at all?"

"Not Mr. Garnett."

"Any other man?"

"No other man I know at present."

George's conscience reproved George's heart for its impertinent satisfaction. After a minute he said: "I need not tell you, Alma, how happy we are to have you with us. But I wonder—have you any plan with regard to your life?"

Alma shook her head mournfully.

"I'm almost in the middle thirties, George, untrained and unskilled. Is there something a woman like me can do? In Cape Town I looked after Adrian, and did odd war-work. But those aren't permanent things."

"I don't mean work. Your father is well off and will leave you provided for, I hope."

"Then what do you mean?"

George, put to it, looked helpless.

"I don't know what I mean. But I feel you aren't happy. I want you to be happy, Alma."

Alma's eyes grew misty.

George put his hand on hers.

"Don't, Alma, don't, my dear." His voice quivered.

She got up suddenly, and he followed.

"I have decided to go back to Cape Town," she said.

"Why?" he cried. "Because I—what a fool I am!"

She smiled. "Not because you're a fool, George. But because it will be better for me. I have been thinking so for some time. After all, Cape Town is my home. My life lies there. I have thought that often lately. But I haven't known how to put it to you and Ruth. I shan't forget how good you have both been to me. . . . Well, that's decided. I'll tell Ruth to-day. A week or two more of Johannesburg gaiety and then I leave."

CHAPTER XLI

§ 1

It appeared to Alma when she saw her father again that he wore a harassed air. The complacency of his independent widowerhood, the jauntiness of his sexagenerian courtship, were alike gone. Now he looked subdued. He had changed from the combative bantam to the vanquished rooster whom the hens contemptuously peck. His comb dropped palely, his tail-feathers were gone. He made tentative and abortive clutches at authority.

And Mrs. Grant bore herself sourly towards her lord. There was a heavy air of mutual dissatisfaction over the house that made a cold, dispirited thing of Alma's home-coming.

Mrs. Grant explained the state of affairs at the first opportunity.

"Your father," she said, "has been gambling on the share market again. In spite of my repeated warnings."

"Has he lost?" asked Alma.

"Of course, he has lost. If he had won there would have been nothing to complain about. But he never does win. And he never will win. He has no head for money. It's people like him that make the millionaires. Where would all their money come from otherwise?"

She paused rhetorically. Alma could not tell her. She proceeded. "So it means cutting-down expenses again."

Mrs. Grant did not look at Alma as she spoke the words. The words themselves were perfectly reasonable. And yet Alma felt that a blow had been struck. Obviously her stepmother looked on her as an expense to be cut down! . . .

Later her father made a bid for her sympathy.

"Alma, if you had a tip from someone in the know. An absolute certainty. The chance of a life-time. Wouldn't you take it?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Well, there you are," he said in sombre triumph. "That's what happened to me."

"But as it turned out it wasn't an absolute certainty, was it?"

"My dear," said her father sententiously, "nothing in the world is. Except death. When I said an absolute certainty I meant subject to the limitations of the human capacity to prophesy."

The phrase came out glibly. Evidently it was one of a series designed to pacify Mrs. Grant.

"Was it a serious loss?"

"Well, heavy, I should say. But not exactly serious."

"Will it mean the cutting-down of expenses?"

"Who says that? Oh, no, no. I shouldn't think so."

But he looked uneasily at his daughter.

Apparently that aspect too had been fully discussed, Alma thought.

§ 2

The next day Alma went to see Adrian. It happened to be Hester's free afternoon, and the sisters had arranged to meet at Adrian's home. The woman who looked after him lived in a suburb near the hospital.

As Alma walked up to the small cottage, she saw that Hester was already there. She was sitting in the grass playing with Adrian. It struck Alma, even while she ran eagerly forward, that there was nothing in Hester's attitude towards her son suggestive of the bitter wail of "unwantedness" with which she had received his advent into the world.

Alma greeted Hester almost perfunctorily, and threw herself down beside Adrian in the grass. But as she drew him towards her, he suddenly screamed.

"Adrian—baby!" she cried.

He screamed again.

"He's become a little naughty since he's been staying here," said Hester apologetically.

"He has forgotten me," said Alma in a low voice.

"Oh, but he's so young."

"I suppose it's natural. But it's only two months after all since I've been away."

Hester held her arms out towards him. And he nestled against her and looked with shy mutiny at his aunt.

She tried to coax him to come to her, but he refused to move, pressing closer to his mother. A

little look flitted over Hester's face that Alma found herself absurdly resenting. It was a momentarily unleashed look of proud ownership.

"He only sees me once a week," she said—and Alma wished her tone were not so complacent—"but he comes to me. I'm quite surprised."

Alma did not reply.

"So you decided not to remain in Johannesburg," Hester resumed after a pause.

"I longed for Cape Town."

"Honestly?"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. How do George and Ruth get on?"

"Very well, I think."

"Ruth wrote about a certain admirer of yours. What happened?"

"I didn't like him."

"So you really don't want to marry?"

"I don't know what I want. Work perhaps. But what could I do? Do you recommend nursing for me, too?"

Hester thought for a moment.

"It's as good as anything else. There's no friend like work. But it's an exacting friend. And a hard, stern friend. And not a permanent friend either. I'm afraid of old age, Alma."

"Still? . . . But you have your son."

"Yes," said Hester. She put her cheek on Adrian's head. "Yes, I have my son."

Alma remembered what she had said to Hester half in jest, but also half in earnest, about provid-

ing herself with a nephew against her old age. But apparently there was no room for her claim on his life. Hester was absorbing him. . . . Alma felt heavy as she remembered Adrian's refusal to come to her. She had lavished all her heart on him. She might give him all her life. But, in the end, he would go to Hester rather than to her. And rightly, of course. . . .

They spoke of various things. . . . Then, just before Alma was due to go, Hester took a letter out of her handbag. She passed it to Alma. "Read this."

It was a letter from John Oliver.

"Dear Hester—To-morrow we are going to attack, and so you can forgive me for writing to you since this may be good-bye. I suppose you are not sorry. I don't believe any man is more alone than I am. When I passed through England recently I learnt that my mother was dead. They did not know my address and could not communicate with me.

So now I have no one who belongs to me, or who will care what happens to me to-morrow.

I have been thinking of the past. The life I lived in Lost Hope seems to me like the life of another man. I can't imagine I lived it myself. It seems so far away. It doesn't stir me to any feeling at all. My whole life in South Africa seems far away. Even you seem far away—as if I had hardly known you—perhaps, in fact, I didn't. The only thing I am quite sure of is the cold and slush here. And that is pretty bad, but it doesn't get at me either. I don't know why, but I can't feel that anything, either in this world, or the next, matters much.

Perhaps this is the state of mind of a man who is going to die to-morrow.

Well, as I said, I don't care what happens. Only I shouldn't like to be permanently maimed.

I'm writing this to wish you good-bye and good-luck. And the little chap too. And to tell you that if I get through this war I won't, if I can help it, return to South Africa. I don't want ever to see it again. I can promise you that. So, whatever happens, you are done with me. That is what I wanted to tell you. That you can live your life out as if I had never been a part of it.

And now, good-bye once more."

"Well?" said Hester, as Alma handed the pencilled pages back to her.

"It's rather an extraordinary letter, isn't it?" said Alma.

"Extraordinary!" cried Hester. "He has ruined my life, and he doesn't care!"

"He is in a state where he doesn't care about anything." Alma looked at Hester meditatively. "And has he ruined your life, after all?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean are you ruined, Hester? How, for instance, are you worse off than I am? Or worse off than you would have been if you had not married him?"

"The stigma of marriage with such a man!"

"That is only a feeling, and will pass."

"It can't."

"Then it will grow very faint."

"But I am still married to him."

"That will not interfere with your life. You

see what he says. He is not coming back to South Africa. . . . I wonder what happened to him next day. He seemed to be in a prophetic frame of mind."

"His name has not been in any of the casualty-lists. I looked."

After a moment she added: "But he will come back if he gets through this war."

"How do you know?" asked Alma.

"They all do. And back to the diggings too. And back to the black women and the half-caste children. It's like a magnet. Back to the diggings again."

Alma was silent a moment. "I can't argue with you against a groundless feeling, Hester," she said presently. . . .

Hester went with Alma to the little suburban station.

As they waited for the train, Alma said abruptly: "At least you have Adrian. I have nobody."

CHAPTER XLII

§ 1

Alma sat in her compartment on her way back to Cape Town and looked out at the flying suburbs, seeing nothing. Every now and then the tears gathered in her eyes. That was the keenest disappointment of all—that Adrian should have forgotten her. He was, of course, the merest baby, but she recalled his shrinking back into those excluding mother's arms, and felt the action to be symbolical. However she might feel and strive, Adrian was not hers, and never could be hers. His mother had felt his initial advent to be an affront, but now, in his happy development, she claimed him and treasured him. Alma wondered somberly whether, if he had been a failure as a human being, whether then Hester would have allowed her the privilege of Adrian's guardianship. Even this great mother-love one heard so much of was, it seemed to her, an unconscious species of vanity. It came to her dimly that parents loved their children, partly at the call of Nature, but largely as they felt the children reflected credit on the parental fashioning. Thus a filial success was a personal triumph and a filial failure a personal shame. There was no such thing as selflessness—the world ran on for the vanity of the individual.

And yet how strong was this bond of the flesh—this matter of natural right. All her striving could not form so strong a tie. She might give her life to Hester's child, but his mother would still be his mother, and she, as ever, would be nothing.

She applied the axiom to her own case. Did it hold between her father and herself? Unconsciously she shook her head. An unmarried daughter in the thirties was not a source of parental pride in the home of a second wedding.

Her eyes dimmed again. She lived in her father's house on sufferance. The old, old story of the step-mother. How ludicrous!

And what was going to happen now? Ruth's jealousy excluded her from one home. Her step-mother's parsimony from another home. Adrian did not need her, would not want her. Where was she to turn? What was she to do? She had only those capacities which create a home, and there was no home to be created.

And Hester it was who prated of a ruined life!

But she had only herself to blame. What romantic absurdity was it that had held her back from George Buckle for twelve years, that had stood between her and all that a woman's heart cries for? It was well to speak of independence for a woman. What could one do with this independence? Could one eat it, wear it, speak to it, love it? It was after all, but a euphony for loneliness. Who that is happy, is independent—independent of ties? At the most, was not that

kind of independence but the saddest of dependencies? Dependence on one's self alone?

She had lightly let the years slip by. When life had called "Time," she answered gaily, "Time enough."

Ah yes! Time enough for youth to slip by, and hope and happiness.

Her mind returned to the immediate and practical. She shrank from returning to her stepmother's home. She was obviously not wanted there. Would her father make her an allowance sufficient to keep her in modest solitariness?

There was a clutch at her heart as she visualised her future.

As she got out of the train, a man gravely took off his hat to her and passed on. She recognised René van Reede and returned his greeting. But as she walked on she heard him following her. She stopped and waited.

"What's the matter, Alma?" he said.

"The matter?"

"I meant to pass you, but something in your face —you're unhappy."

"But there's nothing wrong."

"You don't want to tell me."

"There isn't anything to tell."

"I heard you were in Johannesburg. Did you like it?"

"Very much."

"Are you well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Your people are all right?"

"Yes."

"I must say good-bye, then."

"Won't you—walk a little way? I can take the next tram home." There was a difference in Alma's voice that surprised him.

"You really want me to?"

"Of course."

Her heart lightened a little. Here was a lonely fellow-being craving the warmth of companionship.

She smiled her shy, wistful smile at him—the smile which had been instinctively wistful all her life.

They walked a little way together in silence.

Then he said:

"Now tell me, Alma."

"Only a passing depression," she answered finally.

"Then pass it on to me," he smiled. "I'll bear it for you. I'm used to the feeling."

She looked at him sympathetically. "Are you unhappy too, René?"

"How should I be happy?" he said; and found himself unburdening the weight of years. "I have ruined the promise of my youth. I have lost my friends and my hopes. My life is a record of weakness and failure. Do you think I can't compare the man I am to the man I might have been? Weren't you shocked when you saw me at the Novelty that night? And do you think I didn't feel anything when I saw you sitting there comfortably with George Buckle, and knew that you

were looking at me, degenerate and shabby, playing my violin in a miserable bioscope orchestra? And then I thought you were married to him. I did. But I wanted to speak to you again. And before I knew it I was standing there next to you. Then I saw you didn't wear a ring. And I forgot everything except that all those years ago"—he stopped sharply. "Well, so I came to see you. I drew some of my salary in advance and bought a new pair of boots so that I could come."

"Yes, I know," said Alma.

"You noticed it, of course. I thought so at the time. I saw a little pity added to the contempt. I welcomed even the pity. Oh, Alma, pity! And once I was so proud and careless. I thought I could toss the world over my shoulder." He stopped with a little gasping laugh. "Heavens, I'm beginning to drivel. . . . You wanted to know if I was happy, but I mustn't bore you. Tell me, what have you been doing with yourself lately, Alma?"

Alma ignored the question in its sudden commonplace tone. "Why didn't you write to me from England, René."

He pondered the old question anew.

"I don't know, Alma," he said at last. "I thought of you often enough. But I couldn't realise you. I couldn't bring you down intimately to terms of paper and ink. I tried to write, but I couldn't. Afterwards—oh, that miserable business. And I made sure you had married George."

"Why?" asked Alma.

"He's a born husband—old George. And he loved you."

Alma's cheeks reddened.

"And did you think of me as a born wife loving him?"

"No, then I thought of you as a lost happiness . . . And he couldn't prevail on you?"

"He almost did—once. The day after you came to see me——"

"The first time? After the night at the Novelty?"

"Yes. That day I offered to marry him. But he had already spoken to Ruth."

She looked at René with her honest, wistful eyes. He was not lacking in imagination and visualised the scene. Her surrender. George's confession.

"Oh, Alma," he breathed, "may I be cursed forever!"

After a moment he added: "You hated me so. You wanted a refuge from the waster who had turned up again to worry you. That was it, wasn't it?"

"No," said Alma. "I had decided to marry him before I met you again."

"Then my coming maddened George into speaking to Ruth. I know. I see it all."

"But he is very happy with Ruth," said Alma.

"Perhaps." said René.

"That is my tram," said Alma.

"But you are nearly home. Won't you walk the little distance?"

"If you like."

They proceeded in silence.

Then René said: "Alma, if I had written from England?"

"Oh, René, what's the use?"

"Alma, will you never forgive me?"

"I have forgiven you."

"You haven't."

"I don't think of it any more."

"Nor of me either. Is that so?"

Into his blue eyes came the old compelling look.

"Alma," he said, "let us begin again. Marry me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't love you."

"I'll make you. You will." He put his hands over hers as they walked through the shadowed, twilight streets. "You do," he added.

The warm contact quickened her heart.

"Oh, René," she broke down, "I'm so lonely."

"Now?"

"No. Before."

"Yes. . . . I know how that feels."

"And frightened of the future."

"With me?"

"I didn't mean that."

"Without me?"

She smiled tremulously.

"My little woman!"

She looked at his face, thin, moulded by time and suffering, and sighed.

"The wasted years!"

"Let us rather speak of the years to come."

"Can things be the same again?" We are not young any more, René. A little pain nestled into her heart. He had cheated her of his best. He had failed her and he had failed himself. What had he to offer a woman now?

They stopped before the little old gate of her father's home. In the shadow he put his arms around her. She felt herself yearning towards him. He might make her unhappy. But no one else could make her happy.

Peace came with the thought. For this she had unconsciously waited. Here was destiny.

THE END